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Rocky Mountain Rob, The CALIFORNIA OUTLAW; OR, The Vigilantes of Humbug Bar.

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AUTHOR OF "THE SPOTTER DETECTIVE," "THE NEW
YORK SHARP," "OVERLAND KIT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
JUDGE LYNCH.

"Lynch 'um!"
"Shoot 'em!"
"Go fur 'um!"
Discordant cries from angry men ringing out sharply on the clear mountain air.
A scene worthy the pencil of Salvator Rosa.

A little valley, through which ran a small stream; by the streamlet's bank thirty or forty rude shanties; the settlement, evidently a mining camp; the whole overshadowed by the rocky peaks of the Salmon river range.

By the bank of the creek, a huge boulder at their backs, two men.

One, an Indian, muffled up to the chin in a dirty red blanket, although the midday sun was pouring his hot beams down upon the earth.

The other, a white man, slender in stature—a decided contrast to the brawny savage at his side—in his shirt-sleeves, his coat and vest both removed, and bare-headed. He was calmly trimming his nails with a little pearl-handled knife. A single glance at his finely-cut, resolute features, his brown hair and eyes, and any of the readers who have followed his fortunes in "Overland Kit" would recognize Dick Talbot, better known, perhaps, as "Injun Dick."

Twenty paces from the two men, Talbot and the Indian—who called himself O-wa-he, and on whom the miners had bestowed the name of Mud-turtle, from his custom of drinking too much fire-water and sleeping off the effects of it in the nearest gully—

was a group of twenty or thirty miners, their faces white with rage, and brandishing various weapons in the air.

From the group of angry and excited men came the menacing cries with which our story commences.

The cries had reference to the two unarmed men who stood with their backs against the boulder.

Little cared they, though, for the hostile shouts.

The Indian, with his arms folded in his blanket, gazed with a stolid face upon the excited throng.

Talbot coolly trimmed the little pink nails as if at peace with himself and all the world.

Three men seemed to be the ringleaders of the angry mob.

The first, a man just about Talbot's size, with a short, yellowish beard, steel-blue eyes, and hair curiously streaked black and yellow. He was known among the miners as Jim York.

The second was a tall, rawboned fellow, with long, yellow hair and sharp, peaked features, a Yankee from 'way down East, by name Denton, but more commonly called "Kangaroo," from his build.

The third, a powerfully-built man of thirty, with the oval face and lantern jaws so common to the



THE ROAD TOOK A SUDDEN, ABRUPT TURN TO THE RIGHT, AND, TO HIS DISMAY, THE DRIVER BEHELD TWO MASKED MEN ON HORSEBACK, STATIONARY AS STATUES IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD.

men of the South-western States. What his right name was no one knew; he simply called himself Bill, and said he came from Arkansas; consequently he was generally termed "Rackensack" by all his acquaintances.

These three men did not bear the best of reputation among the settlers of the mining village known as Barrel Camp, yet at the moment that we follow the fortunes of Dick Talbot, the three were guiding the actions of the miners.

"I say, finish 'em right away!" cried York, flourishing a silver-mounted revolver.

"Yes, string 'em right up!" yelled Kangaroo, a bowie-knife, a foot long, in his hand.

"Don't bother with a rope; riddle 'em full o' holes!" exclaimed Rackensack, leveling an old-fashioned Kentucky rifle menacingly at the two.

"Hadn't we better have a trial?" suggested one of the miners, a little more cool-headed than the rest of the excited throng.

The crowd was increasing every moment, as miner after miner came hurrying into town, attracted by the noise.

"What's the use of a trial, gents?" roared York, defiantly. "Judge Lynch can take care of this affair. We all know that they are guilty. That lying Injun has stole everything he could get his hands on ever since he came to this hyer camp."

"Me good Injun," said the chief, laconically.

"You lie, you 'tarnal cuss!" yelled Kangaroo, in a rage. "You stole my blanket!"

Chief no steal blanket—find 'um," the savage replied.

"And as for the other," continued York, "what do we honest miners want with a sport like him in store-clothes 'round hyer? What does he do for a living? Play poker!"

A groan of disgust went up from the crowd; not really at the idea of Talbot getting his living by playing cards, but—if we analyze the motives which prompted the shout—because hardly one of the throng but had tested Dick's skill in the scientific game known as poker, and had come out the loser thereby.

"What do you do for a living yourself, Jim?" asked Talbot, quietly.

Several of the crowd tittered.

York's principal occupation had been card-playing ever since the town of Barrel Camp had been honored by his distinguished presence.

"And he doesn't play a square game either," continued York.

"You lie," cried Talbot, coolly, "and if I was a free man, and had my weapons, you wouldn't dare to say it."

"Big Injun eat lying pale-face bimeby—sometime," the savage said.

"Come, gents, string us right up without judge or jury," Talbot exclaimed. "Better finish the affair, and have it off your minds. I had about as soon die as live."

"Settle 'em at once, I say!" cried York, taking deliberate aim at Talbot.

"Hold on, gentlemen! Ain't we rushing matters a little?" said a clear-toned voice. The speaker was a youth of perhaps eighteen or twenty, who had ridden up on a fine black horse a few minutes before, and had remained on the outskirts of the crowd in conversation with one of the miners.

The crowd looked in astonishment at the newcomer.

The speaker was slender in form, and delicate in feature. His hair was glossy black and curled in little crispy ringlets all over his head. His face was dark, the skin bronzed by a southern sun. No trace of a beard showed itself upon the chin or lip; yet, boy that he was, the firm-set, resolute chin, and the bright, flashing black eyes told of an iron will.

"Who asked you to interfere?" growled York, with a hostile glance directed at the young man.

"He runs the whole machine, stranger," said Talbot, sarcastically, referring to York.

"It's about time that some one else took hold, then," the stranger said, in his clear, musical voice. "Hadn't you better mind your own business, and not stick your pick into some one else's claim?" asked Rackensack, coming to York's assistance.

"When I strike a 'lead,' I generally follow it up," replied the youth, not in the least abashed by the threatening looks of the ringleaders of the throng. "Gentlemen, I again put the question to you. Haven't you gone a little too fast in this matter? Will you kill a couple of human beings without giving them a chance for their lives? It isn't right. True, we haven't got a court here to try these men, but what of that? Here among the mountains every man is a court in himself. Are you honest men? Can you be bought to say that right is wrong, and wrong is right? No! you have sense—you have honesty; what more do you want in a court of justice?"

"That's so!" cried one of the crowd.

"Co-rect!" ejaculated a second.

"Give 'em a fair trial!" said a third, and a murmur of assent went up from the throats of the brawny miners.

"Ay, a fair trial, that is what I claim for these two men; only that, and nothing more," the stranger exclaimed.

"I don't see much use of a trial; we all know that they are guilty," York said, doggedly. He did not relish being beaten by the stranger.

But the cries of dissent that came from the crowd convinced him that the trial must be had.

"Let's choose a judge and jury, and go ahead," persisted the stranger, "and as I've got myself mixed up in the affair, I'll defend the prisoners."

"Bully for you!" said a stalwart miner, evidently pleased with the boldness of the young man.

"And while you're fixing matters here I want to have a few words with the prisoners."

"Old pards, eh?" suggested one of the crowd.

"Never saw either of them before," the stranger replied.

So, while the crowd in earnest deliberation set themselves to forming Judge Lynch's court, the young man dismounted from his horse and approached the two men whose lives were in such deadly peril.

"A tight place, old man," the stranger said, tersely.

"Yes, rather," Talbot answered, surveying the stranger, with curiosity.

"Your name is Talbot, isn't it?" asked the young man, abruptly.

"Yes," Dick replied, rather astonished.

"Dick Talbot?"

"Yes."

"Wasn't you at Walla Walla about a year ago?"

"Yes."

"I thought you were the same man."

"I don't remember ever having seen you there."

"That's likely."

"And yet I seldom forget a face."

"You never saw mine before," the young man replied, carelessly; "but, come to business; what's the trouble here?"

"Too quick with my fire-arms, that's all."

"A quarrel?"

"Yes; two of them on me: they drew their weapons first, and I fired mine through the skirt of my coat without taking the trouble to draw it."

"Kill 'em both, eh?" asked the young man.

"No; only one; winged the other," Talbot replied.

"I've had a bad streak of luck ever since I left Walla Walla about a year ago. It's been going from bad to worse. I wouldn't have cared for myself, stranger, but there was another, my wife; I've seen her sicken and pine away, day by day, and not an hour ago, when these fellows dragged me from my shanty, they took me from beside her dead body. If it hadn't been for that they would have never taken me living. But I guess the thing is played now; my pile of checks are gone, and I'll 'chip in' nary time more. I tell you, stranger, 'tain't any use to fight against luck; quit the game when you find it's dead against you."

"Your wife is gone, eh?" the young stranger said, thoughtfully.

"Yes," Dick replied, and the big tears rose in the eyes of the strong man despite his efforts to keep them back.

"I am sorry for that," the stranger said, musingly. "I wanted her to live."

Talbot looked at the young man in amazement.

"I don't understand how her life or death can concern you," he said.

"You will understand one of these days," the young man replied, carelessly. "Do you know that I have been 'hunting you' for nearly a year?"

Dick shook his head.

"That's so. What do you suppose I want of you?"

"I can't imagine."

"I want to kill you," and the young man uttered the words as coolly as though he had but asked the time of day.

"To kill me?" Dick cried, in amazement. "Well, all you have got to do is to hold your tongue and my good friends over yonder will save you the trouble."

"Oh, no! I am going to save you from them; save you for myself. It is not your death simply that I want; you must die a death of torture, calling vainly upon heaven in mercy to end your sufferings. I'll give you another year to live, and then prepare, for I'll hunt you down were you to seek concealment at the very end of the earth."

Talbot looked at the young stranger in utter amazement; at first he thought he was talking with a madman, but there was no trace of madness in the clear eyes and calm face.

"Stranger, I don't know how I ever injured you, but if I get clear of this difficulty I shall begin to think that the luck has changed, and I'll make a tough fight for my life."

"That is just what I want. I should be ashamed to strike a man who made no resistance," the stranger replied. "Remember, a year from to-day I strike upon your trail; hide yourself where you please, I'll find you."

"You won't have to go far, stranger," Talbot replied, quietly. "I am not one of the kind that hides much."

"Now, then, we're all ready for the trial," York exclaimed, putting an end to the conversation.

The court was formed and the lynch trial commenced. Little heed the brawny miners gave to the forms of law. All they wanted was justice.

The trial was brief, and the young stranger carried judge and jury along with him. He proved conclusively that the men who had suffered at Talbot's hands had provoked the quarrel and had first displayed weapons.

The crowd, who had been hounded on by York and his two companions to attack Talbot and the Indian, having had time to think the matter over, had come to the conclusion that it was no great sin for a man to protect himself when assailed.

The verdict of the jury was a peculiar one.

"Not guilty, but the parties had better emigrate."

"All right, gents," Dick exclaimed; "give me back my weapons and I'll git up and dust."

"Mud-turtle go too!" the chief ejaculated; "no like bad white man say 'um steal.'"

Dick's coat and weapons were restored to him, and a deputation headed by the young stranger accompanied the two to the limits of the camp.

"Take care of yourself, old man," said one of the crowd, good-naturedly, as Dick turned to take a last look at the camp.

"I'll try to; good-by, boys," Talbot replied, and then, followed by the Indian, he took the trail leading down the river.

The motley crowd and the young stranger returned to the village, but after giving his horse a feed, the stranger declared he must push on, as he was bound for South Pass and was in a hurry. And so, without revealing his name or business, the savior of Talbot departed.

When Barrel Camp arose next morning it made the discovery that, during the night, the three miners known as Jim York, Kangaroo and Rackensack had left without taking the trouble to bid good-by. The reason for the "levanting" was clear; they feared the vengeance of Injun Dick.

CHAPTER II.

THE CANYON VULTURES.

A YEAR has come and gone since the events related in our last chapter transpired.

The snows have melted on the wooded sides of the Big Horn Mountains, and the spring floods have swollen the Wisdom river and poured their yellow torrents into the mighty Missouri.

From Bannock city along the banks of the river northward, following the course of the stream until it united its waters with those of the Wisdom river, ran the trail which led to the "Humbug Diggings," reputed to be the richest "lead" yet struck in Montana.

At the time of which we write, the coaches from Bannock city ran to Beaver city, situated some ten miles above the junction of the two rivers. Beyond Beaver city an Indian trail led to Humbug Bar, the largest mining camp in the Humbug Diggings, and which was some twenty miles from Beaver, following the trail which, like a huge snake, wound its way down through the canyons and up along the sides of the frowning sierras.

The coach for Beaver city from Bannock had made good time that warm spring morning, and at twelve o'clock exactly, pulled up in front of Dutch John's shanty from whence Dutch John himself came forth, and announced "dinner."

Driver and passengers alike descended from the coach.

"Mein gracious!" exclaimed John, in astonishment, when he beheld the driver; "Bob Shook!"

"Co-rect you are, Dutchy!" exclaimed the driver, cutting a pigeon-wing.

The driver was a muscular-built young fellow of twenty-five, with curling hair straying down over his shoulders in long ringlets, and a full, round, florid face adorned with a mustache and side-whiskers like in color to his curly locks. Such was Bob Shook, the express-rider, whose route extended from Humbug Bar to Beaver City.

"Sapperment! You drive mit de cooch?"

"Now you 'call' me!" the driver replied, expressively. "Sweet William was sick this morning, and as I happened to be down to Bannock on a leetle business, and was all ready to go home, I volunteered to drive for him."

There were only three passengers in the coach. One, a brawny miner bound for the new diggings at Humbug; the second, a Jew tradesman, who kept a general store at the "Bar;" the third was a woman.

A young and beautiful girl.

In person, she was a little above the medium height of women; her face was one of rare beauty; and yet, there was something masculine about it. Possibly it was the large, glittering black eyes, the swarthy skin, and the short, crispy curls that adorned her head, which produced the masculine look. She was dressed very plainly, and there was an earnest, anxious expression visible upon her features every now and then when she relapsed into thought.

Dinner over, the passengers again repaired to the coach. The girl resumed her seat at once, but the two men at the door of the Dutchman's shanty, picking their teeth, were casting curious glances at their female companion.

"She's a boy, she seems a good deal more like a boy than a girl!" the Jew exclaimed, suddenly.

"Wal, now you speak onto it, stranger, it 'pears to me that I've had a kind of a sort of an idea that way myself," the miner said, with cool deliberation.

After this exchange of opinions the two resumed their seats in the coach.

Shook was busy tying a loose strap connected with the harness of the off horse, and the shanty-keeper came up to his side.

"What news mit the town?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing 'ticular, 'cept that thar's a chance fur some smart man to make a thousand dollars."

"Mein goodness!" ejaculated the host in astonishment.

"Yes—by taking Rocky Mountain Rob into camp."

"They no get him, pretty much, all the while," the Dutchman said, with a knowing shake of the head.

"That's jest what I think, Dutchy," Shook replied, walking to the coach and preparing to mount the box.

"What ish dat you say about Rocky Mountain Rob?" asked the Jew, sticking his head out of the coach window.

"Only speaking of the reward offered for him in Bannock this morning," Shook said.

"Is there any danger of his attacking us?" the girl questioned, her voice strong and musical, one of the deep-toned voices which, once heard, are seldom forgotten.

"Not much, miss; it's the coaches going the other way that he troubles. He wants the gold-dust and plunder coming from the mines."

Then Bob mounted to the box, took up the reins, and in answer to his cheery call, the horses galloped off.

"Who is this Rocky Mountain Rob, stranger?" asked the miner, who was evidently new to that portion of the country.

"He ish one great scoundrel!" exclaimed the Jew.

"A road-agent, sir," the girl said. It was plain that she was no stranger to that part of Montana.

"Oh, a feller that robs the coaches, eh?" the miner asked.

"Yes; the Governor has offered a reward of a thousand dollars for his capture, either alive or dead," the girl said.

"Wal, I reckon that wouldn't be a bad speculation to go into," the miner said, thoughtfully.

"Ah, mine goot fr'end, he ish von very devil!" exclaimed the Jew, earnestly. "He ish von blood-thirsty rascal. He rob me of five hundred dollars, only a month ago, when I vash going to buy me some goots to Bannock."

"Don't anybody know where he keeps himself?" the miner asked.

"Oh, no! mein gootness, no!" cried the Jew, quickly; "he hides in the mountains. And then, too, he always wears a black mask over his face."

For a mile or so the coach rolled on, and the passengers remained quiet.

Suddenly the coach halted. Out of the window went the heads of the passengers. They expected to see Rocky Mountain Rob and his road-agents in full force.

They were disappointed. Two Indians wrapped up in their blankets, stood by the roadside. They had evidently been sitting down, and had risen at the approach of the coach.

"Which way?" asked the driver.

"Bannock," said the taller of the two savages.

The girl within the coach started when her eyes fell upon the face of the savage who had spoken. She evidently recognized him.

"Seen any horsemen with their faces kivered up with black masks on the road?" Shook asked.

The savage shook his head.

"Mud-turtle seen no white men since sunset," the chief replied.

Again the coach went on its way. During the brief conversation, the Indian who had taken no part in the colloquy had watched the face of the girl closely, while apparently taking no heed of either the coach or its inmates. If the girl had recognized the savage who called himself "Mud-turtle," it was quite plain that she in turn had also been recognized.

The road now wound down into a canyon; grim ledges of rock rose up on either side—so steep that even the sure-footed mountain-goat could never have scaled those walled rocks.

The miners, with their usual aptness, had fittingly named it the Devil's Canyon.

Hardly had the coach passed within the dark shadows of the canyon when the driver heard the sound of horses' hoofs behind him.

Glancing back, he saw that three masked men, mounted on powerful steeds, were riding in chase.

"I'll give you a run for it, jest fur greens!" Shook muttered, as he curled the long whip-lash in the air and brought it down upon the flanks of the horses.

On went the coach and steadily behind came the horsemen.

At the end of about the first half-mile or so, Shook glanced behind. The horsemen had not gained upon him as yet, but a moment's glance convinced the practical eyes of the express driver that they were not trying to overtake him, but were riding at an even, steady gallop.

The canyon ended, and the coach entered the wooded defile beyond. The road took a sudden, abrupt turn to the right, and, to his dismay, the driver beheld two more masked men on horseback, stationary as statues in the middle of the road, the sunbeams glistening down upon the leveled revolvers in their hands.

"I pass, by thunder!" cried Shook, in disgust, pulling up his horses.

"What's the matter?" asked the miner, putting his head out of the coach window.

"Rocky Mountain Rob!" replied Shook, laconically.

"Oh, Moses!" cried the Jew, in alarm.

The miner drew forth a heavy revolver.

"I'll gi'n 'em a fight, anyway!" he muttered.

"Oh, mine goot friend, don't!" exclaimed the Jew, in a terrible fright. "Dat ish no use; dey are ten to one!"

"Durned ef I keer!" replied the miner, coolly.

"They don't walk over me without a tussle."

"You're a brave man!" cried the girl, suddenly, and from beneath her cloak she drew a pair of silver-mounted revolvers. "I will help you! You take that side of the coach and I will take this. The chances are all in our favor, for we have the protection of the coach."

"Marm, you're clear grit, I reckon!" exclaimed the miner, in great admiration.

"Oh, Moses! we shall all be killed!" the Jew exclaimed, in great terror, and down on his knees he tumbled.

"Do you surrender?" asked one of the masked men, in a hoarse voice, evidently disguised.

"You bet!" Shook replied, laconically.

"Tell them inside the coach to throw out their weapons."

"Tell the coyote we'll see him durned first, an' then we won't!" growled the miner, from the interior of the coach.

"Are you going to make a fight of it, stranger?" Shook inquired, in amazement.

"You can jest stake your pile on that, old hoss!" cried the miner. "Tell the cuss ef he wants our weapons, fur to come an' take 'em."

"Now you're talking!" the driver exclaimed, "and, as this ain't any of my funeral, I'll jest git out of the way."

Shook jumped nimbly to the ground and then clambered up on a huge rock which stood by the roadside.

The road-agents looked upon this movement with astonishment.

"What's the matter?" The masked man who was apparently the chief of the party put the question.

"The parties inside say that if you want their weapons, fur to come an' git 'em," Shook said; "an' now jest go ahead with the fun. I'll bet two to one they flax you!"

"Do they know who I am?" cried the masked man, in a rage.

"I reckon they don't."

"Tell 'em that it's Rocky Mountain Rob and his road-agents, and that if they are not out of that coach within five minutes, I'll riddle it with my revolver-balls till it's as full of holes as a sieve!"

"Stranger, I straddle your blind!" cried the miner, contemptuously. "You can't bluff this hyer party, no way you kin fix it. We're armed an' chock full of fight."

The masked man held a brief conversation with his companions in a low tone. It was evident that the bold defiance had somewhat astonished them.

"How many have you got in the coach?" the road-agent asked.

"Sixteen, an' all of 'em armed with four revolvers, two shot-guns an' a bowie-knife apiece," Shook replied, with a solemn face.

"You lie! it won't hold sixteen!" cried the road-agent, in a rage.

Shook, nimble as a squirrel, slid off down the back of the boulder and took refuge behind the trunk of a pine tree, drawing his revolver from his pouch as he did so.

"Tell me I lie ag'in an' I'll drill a hole right through you, you darned pole-cat!" cried Shook, defiantly.

"I jest as lief take a hand in this game myself, seeing as how it's a free fight!"

Again the road-agents held a low conversation together. It was quite apparent that they did not care to attack the coach. Indeed, there was little reason for their doing so, even if no resistance were offered, for in a coach bound to the mining region there was little prospect of booty.

"You had better keep a civil tongue in your head, Bob Shook," the chief of the road-agents—who was, indeed, the notorious Rocky Mountain Rob in person—said, meaningly. "Many a dark night this spring and summer will catch you on the road from Humbug Bar to Beaver city."

"Oh, I don't ask any odds of you!" Shook replied.

"I don't low any two-legged man fur to tell me I lie, you bet, now."

"Is thar a man in the coach named Talbot?" the road-agent asked.

The girl gave a slight nervous start when the name fell upon her ears; her agitation was not noticed, though, by the other two in the coach.

"I reckon I don't know; I'll find out, though," Shook replied. "What mought your name be, stranger?" He addressed the miner, who, revolver in hand, was peering out of the coach window.

"Johnny Bird," he replied; "and I'm the gay young rooster from the Geyser Spring!" he added, defiantly.

"Ain't no sich person as Talbot aboard," Shook replied to the road-agent.

"He's the man I want," the robber said, in a dissatisfied way. "Well, take keer of yourself, Bob; I'll go fur you some night."

Then the road-agent put a whistle to his lips, blew a shrill blast upon it, wheeled his horse around, and, followed by his companion, galloped away.

The three men in the rear, obedient to their leader's signal, turned their horses round and galloped back into the canyon.

Bob came from his ambush behind the tree and approached the coach.

"Stranger, you're a reg'lar meat-ax, you are!" he cried, in admiration. "That's the first time that Rocky Mountain Rob was ever backed down."

"This hyer young gal kin take most of the credit," said the miner, with becoming modesty. "She were jest as full of fight with them little pop-guns as I were. Marm, I should feel proud to be your brother," and the miner bowed gallantly.

A peculiar light shone in the dark eyes of the girl, but she only inclined her head silently and did not speak.

"One thing gits me," said the driver, reflectively, "and that is, what on yearth did Rocky Mountain Rob want of this hyer Talbot?"

"I think I can tell you that," the girl said, suddenly. "This man Talbot is one of the gamblers at Bannock city. He has made a bet of a thousand dollars that, within three months, he will bring the road-agent, Rocky Mountain Rob, either living or dead, into Bannock. The road-agent has probably heard of this bet, for they say that he has friends in the large mining towns; and that is the reason why he wishes to find Talbot."

"He'll have his hands full, I reckon," Shook said. Then he mounted the box, and the coach again went on its way, and a little after five it halted before the express-office in Beaver city, the end of the route.

CHAPTER III THE FORTUNE-TELLER.

HUMBUG BAR!

The principal town of the Humbug mining region. Geyser Springs, Get-up Gulch and Poor-shoot City might boast of their numbers and wealth, but the "Bar" took them all down.

The diggings had been discovered by a party prospecting northward from Bannock. They had followed the old Indian trail up the banks of the Wisdom river, had driven down into the canyons and climbed up on the rocks, and at last had struck the Humbug valley, but then unnamed, for no white foot had ever trodden there before. The prospecting miners found a little dell, hardly an eighth of a mile wide, and about half a mile long, shut in by great rocky peaks and fringed by massive pines, the primeval forest, grim sentinels of the treasures of the valley.

The Wisdom river, changing in character from the mountain torrent to the meadow streamlet, murmured through the valley, rippling over golden sands.

And at the southern part of the valley, where the river found an outlet down a rocky chasm in a succession of little leaps, the miners discovered a "pocket," from whence they took small lumps of virgin gold.

The rough-bearded men were wild with joy. They held a council. They examined the yellow sands over which the clear waters of the Wisdom flowed. They fancied that beneath the sands countless oceans of gold lay hid. They determined to turn the river from its course. From the nature of the ground this was not a very difficult task, although it was formed and the course of the river turned abruptly to the south, but when the stream, cutting a new channel for itself, reached the rocky barrier which hemmed in the valley, it sought its old outlet again.

The dam was a success, but the project a failure. The yellow sand of the river's bed concealed no golden nuggets. Then, all of a sudden, it came to the minds of the miners that the precious pebbles of gold had come from the mountain canyons north of the valley.

The bed of the streamlet was abandoned, and the pick and shovel, wielded by stout arms, attacked the mountain's side.

The second attempt was more successful than the first. Gold was found, though not in very great quantities at first.

In some mysterious manner the news reached Bannock of the new discoveries on the Wisdom, and, when the spring time came, quite a tide of emigration set in. Then came the spring floods. The dam was washed away, and the Wisdom flowed again in the old channel, but, where the dam had been a bar remained, over which only flowed a few inches of water.

The diggings had never received a definite title, being variously termed the "new diggings," the "valley strike," or the "Wisdom river lead;" but, after the formation of the bar, a party of the original explorers gathered together one evening in the great resort of the miners, old Pop Shook's shanty, the "Waterproof saloon," got to talking over the odd circumstance that the settlement—the great mining city, which was to be sometime in the future—had never been named. And there, in solemn deliberation, they decided that in the future it should be called Humbug Bar. First, because the dam, which had produced the bar, had been but as a glittering vision; second, because there was a bar there; and third, because it was a good American name, and perfectly original.

So Humbug Bar was duly christened in a dozen glasses of old Pop Shook's whisky, and Humbug Bar it had ever since remained.

The "city" boasted about five hundred inhabitants, that is, counting the people of Geyser Springs, Get-up Gulch, and Poor-shoot City, all three of which were really only suburbs of the Bar, although at one

time each one of the three had set out to rival the parent town. But the establishment of the Express office and the Post-office at the Bar had settled the question of supremacy forever.

It was a cool, balmy spring evening—just a week, by the way, from the time when Rocky Mountain Rob had stopped the coach in the Devil's Canyon—that a goodly number of the inhabitants of the Bar had gathered in the bar-room of the Waterproof saloon, and were engaged in conversation.

All the principal men of the Bar were there, the noted leaders of public sentiment.

There was old Pop Shook, the keeper of the Waterproof saloon, which was a hotel as well, the only "first class" house at the Bar. Pop was also postmaster. The post-office was in the express-office, right next door. Pop was the express-agent, too, for the Bar—his son, Bob, being the express-rider. And there was Doc Kidder, the head and front of the Bar, reputed to be the best poker player in Montana, and Johnny Bird, "the gay young rooster from the Geyser Springs," half miner, half gambler; and Colonel Jack, an iron-gray-haired, silent man, a hard drinker, and one generally referred to in all cases of dispute. Rumor said that he had once been a colonel in the regular army, but that he had got into trouble and had been obliged to resign; in reality, that he had been allowed to resign on account of his past services, when another man would have been court-martialed and dismissed from the service in disgrace. The colonel was president of the Poor-shoot City Gulch Mining Company. Bob Shook, the express-rider, was there, too; and Teddy Flynn, from Get-up-Gulch, and a dozen other representative men, either of the Bar or its suburbs.

In one corner of the saloon sat three men who took no part in the general conversation. They were all sitting close together in a knot.

The three have changed a little since the day in Barrel Camp, when they sat in trial on Dick Talbot, but one would easily recognize them as Jim York, Kangaroo, and Rackensack Bill.

All their attention was given to a roughly-dressed man who was leaning carelessly on one end of the bar, listening to the conversation going on.

The man was a stranger to the Bar, having only arrived there five or six days before, and had said his name was William Smith.

In the mining regions no one ever expressed any doubt regarding anybody else's name.

"Show! you don't say so? Wal, I reckon it's mighty queer!" Johnny Bird exclaimed, in wonder.

Johnny was a muscularly-built fellow, standing nearly six feet high. That Johnny was extremely fastidious about his personal appearance was plain, rough as his dress was. His long yellow hair was carefully oiled, and hung down over the collar of his red shirt—he wore no coat—and he had little golden rings in his ears. If we should strip up the shirt-sleeve and display the brawny arm, a blue anchor surrounded by a circle of stars, and beneath it a full-rigged ship under full sail, would have excited the suspicion that at some period of his life, Johnny had followed the sea for a living.

"It's so," said Doc Kidder, decidedly. "I saw the sign myself on the shanty as I came by it this evening."

"A queer place for a fortune-teller to come," the colonel said, dryly.

"I guess Pop knows more 'bout it than any one else," Bob Shook remarked, referring to his father.

All the group at once turned their attention to the old man who was behind the bar.

Old Pop Shook was a character. He was a man about fifty years of age, rather short in stature and quite fat, with a florid face, fringed by reddish whiskers, and the short hair, which curled around the sides of his bald head, was of the same hue.

Pop's family consisted of his son Bob, the express-rider, and a charming daughter of eighteen, Bessie, the acknowledged belle of the Bar, or for that matter, the belle of the whole country, for young women were few and far between north-west of Bannock city.

"Come, Pop, let us know all about it!" Doc Kidder exclaimed. "They say she's deuced pretty."

"She ain't bad-lookin' now, I tell ye," the landlord of the "Waterproof" said, decidedly.

"That's so," Bob added. "Johnny hyer ought to know something 'bout it. He rode in the coach with her from Bannock to Beaver 'bout a week ago. Don't you remember, Johnny, the plucky gal that showed fight when the road-agents stopped the coach?"

Johnny stared at Bob in astonishment.

"You don't say so!" he cried, in wonder. "That the gal? Wal, now, she's just as putty as they make 'em! Got eyes like—like—wal, now, blow me ef I ever see'd sich eyes afore; go right through a feller like a streak of lightning!"

"And she showed fight when the robbers stopped the coach?" the colonel asked, evidently interested.

"You bet she did," Johnny exclaimed; "pulled out the puttiest leetle pair of pop-guns you ever did see. Thunder! I'd a fit them ef thar'd bin a hull grist of Rocky Mountain Robs."

"Well, boys, I'll tell you all I know about it," old Shook said. "You see she came hyer 'bout a week ago, an' of course came an' stopped hyer. I kinder wondered fur to see a young woman traveling round alone. I axed ef she were in search of anybody, thinkin', you know, that she might hev a brother or a husband, or somethin' up in the mines. But she said that all she wanted was a leetle shanty, an' could I hire her one? Wal, you know, boys, shanties are skeerse in town, but that very night poor Jim Collins got knocked on the head up the road by somebody, an' as Jim owed me considerable, I jes' took possession of his shanty. He didn't owe anybody else anything, an' in course nobody objected. So I jes' let the shanty to the young woman, an' the very next day she hired a Chinaman an' took possession. I ain't seen or heard anything 'bout her since till this hyer story 'bout her being a fortune-teller was told me by one of the boys, who see'd the Chinaman nailing the sign on the shanty."

"What's her name?" Kidder asked, caressing his smoothly shaven chin thoughtfully.

"Merimac or somethin' ov that sort," old Shook answered.

"Well, if she's good looking I think I'll give her a call," Kidder observed. "Maybe she'll be able to tell me how many games of poker I ought to play a day to be lucky."

"I reckon she'll be well patronized ef she don't charge too much. I swow I'd go a dollar any time for to get a good square look at a good-lookin' female up in this hyar country," Johnny remarked.

Then the conversation turned upon other subjects. The roughly-dressed man who had been leaning on the counter and listening to the conversation without taking any part in it, quietly left the saloon.

York and his two companions, after exchanging a few words together in whispers, got up and followed him.

The stranger proceeded at once to the shanty occupied by the young woman who had so astonished the inhabitants of Humbug Bar by the public announcement of her calling.

"Her face was very familiar to me," the stranger muttered, as he walked onward, "and yet she is a stranger to me. If I meet her face to face and hear her speak, I can easily tell whether I know her or not."

There was a broad, full moon shining in the sky, and it was almost as light as day.

York and his two companions slouched along in the shadow of the shanties, following on the track of the stranger.

Smith—as he had called himself—halted in front of the little shanty occupied by the strange woman.

A shingle was affixed to the house; on it was rudely painted:

"COLOMBA MERIMEE, FORTUNE-TELLER."

Smith paused for a moment, read the sign, then advanced to knock, but the door flew open at his approach; he had evidently been observed.

A Chinaman appeared.

"Comme in," the heathen said, grinning; and as Smith entered, the Chinaman closed the door behind him and ushered him into the inner room, then retired.

A candle lighted up the apartment, and by the table sat a dark-haired, black-eyed girl, wonderfully beautiful.

"Good-evening, Mr. Talbot," she said, rising as he entered the room.

"Hallo! you know me?" Talbot exclaimed, for it was Injun Dick in the strange disguise.

"Yes, I have been expecting you ever since night-fall," she replied. "Let me warn you, for deadly peril surrounds you. Had you remained a day longer in Bannock you would never have quitted it. You are treading on the edge of a fearful gulf."

CHAPTER IV.

THE BELLE OF HUMBUG.

BESSIE SHOOK was a tall, fair-haired girl, with a round, good-natured-looking face, wherein shone a pair of clear blue eyes. She was the acknowledged belle of Humbug Bar. In fact, not a rival had she for fifty miles, north, south, east or west. A wholesome, buxom girl, quick in speech, and ready in reply. She attended to the hotel department of the Waterproof saloon.

Report stated that the blue-eyed Bessie had received an offer of marriage from every miner who had ever set foot in the Humbug Valley, and one and all she had laughed at, and made reply that they had better go back to their wives whom they had abandoned—a reply which struck home five times out of ten, and made some grow red and others pale when the girl's answer brought back the memory of the days that were gone, and the joys—or sorrows—which they had left behind them.

Bessie had never a favorite in all the Humbug region.

In the expressive language of the Pacific Slope, she said that "all men were first-class frauds, and that she didn't take any stock in them."

Bessie was a great favorite with all the frequenters of the Waterproof saloon.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon, on the same day that the events related in the preceding chapter took place. Bessie was sitting in the dining-room of the "Waterproof," an apartment rather limited in extent, but still quite big enough for the guests of Pop Shook, except on great festive occasions. She was looking out of the window at a jumping-match, which was in progress before the hotel, and in which the "Gay young rooster from the Geyser Springs," Johnny Bird, and Bob Shook took an active part.

The entrance of a guest disturbed the girl's meditation.

The guest was the man known as Jim York. The girl greeted him with a smile as he sat down at one of the little tables.

"Get me something to eat, Bessie, will you?"

"Yes; what do you want, Jim?" she asked, rising to wait upon him.

"Oh, anything that you've got in the house handy," he replied.

"Give you some ham and eggs?"

"That will do, and I'll come and look on while you cook 'em," he said.

The girl made a wry face. "Do you think that it will be interesting?"

"Yes, I s'pose so. I can tell then whether you will make a good wife or not, and p'haps I can recommend you to some likely fellow."

The girl tossed her head.

"The fellow had better get some one to recommend him to me," she said, laughing.

"You're just spoilt, Bessie," York said, quite gravely.

But the girl did not notice his manner. She proceeded at once to the kitchen, which was just off the dining-room, put the fryingpan on the fire, placed a slice of ham in it, and proceeded to break the eggs in a cup.

York stood leaning against the door-post, watching her intently.

The ham sizzled and sputtered as the heat of the fire began to affect it.

Bessie stood by the table watching it. She was conscious that York's eyes were fixed intently on her face.

Jim York had been a puzzle to the Belle of Humbug. He was about the only young and good-looking man who had come to the Bar since she had arrived there and become the mistress of the Waterproof saloon, who had not fallen down and worshipped her almost at first sight.

York had not done so. For the first week after his arrival he had not seemed to even notice—even though he took his meals constantly at the Water-

proof—that he was waited upon by a young and pretty girl, instead of the usual rough, half-grown boy or old battered-up veteran.

Bessie, spoiled beauty as she was, felt annoyed that there should be a man within reach of her smiles who seemed so utterly indifferent to them. And, though rumor said that York's character was none of the best, and that he made more money at night by the aid of the painted pasteboards, known as "cards," than he did in the sunlight from the "pay-dirt" which his "strikes" up the Wisdom yielded him, York stood high among the inhabitants of the Bar, and was reported to be worth more money than any man in the Humbug Valley, Doc Kidder alone excepted.

But he was far from possessing Kidder's popularity. He was cold-blooded and merciless. Woe to the man who sat down to a quiet game with York. Not till his last dollar was gone did he yield up his prey, and then there was no giving the loser a few dollars back, to get him out of town, and start him afresh on his road, to try another "luck" with fortune. "Let him beg his way, the fool!" York would say, contemptuously, and light his cigar as coolly as though he had not brought a fellow-creature to ruin and despair.

Kidder was a different kind of man altogether. He was free and open-hearted, a favorite with all—men, women and children.

Little by little York's reserve had disappeared, until at last he and Bessie got to be quite friendly. He had not made love to her, though, and that part had not pleased the girl; not that she cared two straws about York, but that she was so accustomed to have every new-comer offer incense at her shrine of beauty, that the young man's coldness fretted her.

But now, as York stood by the doorway, watching her with his cold, keen eyes, she felt that he was about to say more than he had ever said to her before.

She was nervous; she felt that her face was getting very red. At first she tried to persuade herself that it was the heat of the fire, or the smoke of the ham frying in the pan; but in her secret heart she knew that it was the cold eyes of the man fixed so intently upon her face, which sent the blood to her cheeks.

"Do you know, Bessie, that you are a very pretty girl?" York said, quietly.

"Do you think so?" And the girl busied herself over the fire, making quite a fuss over the pan that was getting along all right without her care.

"Yes, you're a regular first-chop of a girl, as a Chinaman would say, and I've come to the conclusion that I think a great deal of you."

"Do you like your ham well done?" the girl asked, suddenly, bending over the pan, and thus concealing her face from view.

"Well, yes, I think that I like it pretty well done," he answered, slowly and deliberately. He was making love with the same coolness with which he turned up a Jack from the bottom at eucher, or slipped a ten-spot into his boot, and took a "bower" from his sleeve in its place.

"The fire is very hot," the girl said, slowly, finding that he did not speak, and stealing a sly glance at him from under her long lashes.

"Yes, I judged so by your face," York rejoined.

The girl's face grew scarlet, and she drove the fork into the ham, and turned it over as if the fate of nations depended upon her action.

"Bessie, I'm lonely down at my shanty," he continued, "and I want to hire a good cook to come and work for me."

"There's plenty of cooks—Chinamen," the girl replied, dishing up the ham and putting the eggs in its place.

"I don't want a 'John,'" he replied, "I want you; will you come? I'll give you a nice gold ring, and swear to take care of you all the rest of your life."

The girl's triumph had come at last. York was at her feet, but, strange to say, she did not enjoy her triumph. York was altogether too much in earnest. He was not like the other suitors, who had plumped down on their knees, and talked of revolvers and bowie-knives, if they were refused; and when the refusal came, afterward comforted themselves by getting "howling" drunk, and kicking up the devil's own row, in a free fight outside the Waterproof saloon.

York was no such man, and Bessie all at once woke to the knowledge that he was not a man to be trifled with by any woman.

She had courted the man's attentions, tried to make him care for her, simply because he had seemed indifferent to her charms, and now that he was in the toils, she discovered, too late, that it would have been better for her if she had left him alone.

The question came, and the answer must be yes or no. Which should it be? She discovered that she did not like him well enough to say "yes," and she was afraid to say "no."

York was reputed to be a merciless enemy, one who neither forgot nor forgave—an uncertain friend and a terrible foe.

One course only was open to her. Evade the question.

"Oh! do you want your eggs turned over?" she asked, attempting to ignore the question that he had put so directly.

"Yes, turn them over," he said, cold as ever.

The eggs flopped over in the hot fat and sent a cloud of steam up into Bessie's eyes, causing her to retreat a step, and, as she did so, she felt York's arm around her waist and his hot breath upon her cheek.

CHAPTER V.

A PREDICTION.

TALBOT looked at the girl in wonder. Calmly she returned the gaze.

"You have come to test my power," she said, finding he did not speak.

Talbot had remained silent, evidently puzzled.

"Yes, partly that and partly something else," he replied.

"I knew that you would come the moment that you heard that I was here," she said.

"You did? There was a slight trace of astonishment in Talbot's voice.

"Yes; I was sure of it."

"I beg your pardon!" Talbot exclaimed, suddenly;

"but will you permit me to ask you why you were sure that I would come to see you when I learned that you were here?"

"Because you are a gambler, and, like all who follow your evil trade, you are superstitious. You believe in luck; that it runs counter one hour, and in your favor the next. You have taken a dangerous task upon yourself, and you would learn from me whether you are to succeed or fail; whether you will take the desperate road-agent a helpless prisoner into Bannock, and there receive the thousand dollars blood-money offered for him, or whether you will fall by the bullet of the robber in some lonely canyon, with the vulture and the wolf as chief mourners by your side."

"My dear young lady, if you keep on in this strain, you'll speedily convince me that you are not a fortune-teller—that the gift of second sight has been denied you, and that, in reality, you are what an average American would call a first-class fraud," Talbot said, banteringly.

"Denial is easy," the girl replied, scornfully.

"So is assertion," he said, quickly; "but assertion is not proof. You tell me that I come to see you on a certain quest, and now I tell you that it is nothing of the sort; that you are utterly and thoroughly wrong."

"And you do not come for the purpose of learning whether you will succeed in winning your bet or not?"

"No."

"Why do you come?"

"If you cannot tell that, your skill as a fortune-teller must be scant," he said, laughing.

"No," she replied, slowly, "that is beyond all earthly power, even though aided by the subtle influence of the spirit world. In the palm of your hand I can read the lines, which tell of your past life and predict the important events of the future. Gazing in the depths of my magic crystal, and aided by the mystic gift of looking into the future, which the seventh daughter gives to the seventh daughter, I can warn you of dangers to come, but cannot tell you how to avoid them."

"Your information cannot prove of much service, then," he said, dryly.

"Why not?" she demanded, quickly. "Is the chart, which shows the location of the sunken reef beneath the wave, of no use to the mariner who holds the helm of the goodly ship? Will the knowledge of the quicksand not save the traveler from sinking into it? Why, then, will not the knowledge of the future be of use to you?"

"I will test your skill, at all events, since I am here," he said, gayly; "but I assure you that I had another purpose in view when I came hither."

"And that purpose?" she asked, curiously.

"That is for you to find out," he replied, with a baffling smile. "I will own, though, that you do possess some mystic power, for you penetrated my disguise in an instant; but, as you confess that you expected me, that is not so wonderful."

"You wish to try my power?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Give me your hand."

Talbot extended the small, white hand, his chiefest pride.

A convulsive shudder shook the frame of the girl as she took the cold, white hand within her own warm palms.

Talbot noticed her agitation and wondered at it.

The eyes of the girl sparkled with a strange luster; her face was unnaturally white, and her bosom rose and fell as the quick breath came from between the white teeth.

"First, I will speak of the past," she said, slowly.

A cloud gathered for a moment on the face of the gambler, and a sad look came into his clear, blue eyes.

"My past life has been miserable enough," he said, coldly; "only a little bit of sunshine here and there."

"And all that sunshine came from a woman's eyes," she said, slowly, looking not into the palm of the hand which she held within her own, but straight into his eyes.

Talbot did not reply.

Then the girl let her eyes rest upon the white palm. With her finger she traced a line toward the wrist.

"Two years ago, at Walla Walla, this hand was stained with blood," she said slowly, and a strange, unnatural gleam came into her eyes. "This little cross on the line of life tells of a bloody encounter which came near being fatal to you. Am I not right?"

"Yes," he answered, and again a puzzled look came upon his face. She noticed the look in an instant.

"You wonder at my knowledge," she said, quickly.

A quiet smile stole over Talbot's face.

"No, I do not," he replied; "however skillful you may be at reading hands, it is very evident to me that you are not good at reading faces. I do not wonder that you should know of my being concerned in an affray two years ago. All Walla Walla knew of it, and I think that you were there at that time. That is what puzzles me. I know that I have seen your face, and yet I cannot place you."

"You are wrong!" the girl said, decidedly; "you have never seen the woman who calls herself Colomba Merimee before."

"I'd bet my last chip on it, though!" he said, decidedly.

"I have spoken of the past; now for the future."

With her finger she retraced the line on the palm.

"I see here another cross on the line of life, and the time, six days ago."

Talbot shook his head.

"I have not been in danger within that time."

"You are wrong!" she exclaimed, quickly; "a hidden danger threatened you. Had you remained a day longer in Bannock, you would never have left it. A foe is tracking you down to your death. His arm was raised to strike, but by your abrupt departure you evaded the blow."

"Lucky thing, wasn't it?" Talbot said, coolly.

"But you will not always be so fortunate," she exclaimed, quickly.

"Oh! the foe is still upon my track?" he queried.

"Yes; you have but gained a respite, not a pardon. Here, but a short space further on, is another cross which breaks your line of life, and that bodes a sudden and violent death."

"At the hands of the road-agents probably," Talbot said, in his cool, easy way.

"No; you will never die by their hands."

"By the hand of this unknown foe, then?"

"Yes."

"Another question—if your art can tell so much—how have I injured this person who seeks my life?" he asked.

"Cannot your own heart answer that question?"

Talbot shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Perhaps your memory is bad," she said, quietly.

"Perhaps so, but I wouldn't advise you to bet on that, though, for you would most surely lose."

"Can you not remember some deed of blood—some life rudely snatched from the world by your merciless hand?" the girl demanded, sternly.

"No," Talbot replied, firmly; "no man ever fell by my hand except in a fair fight. Whatever my faults may be, no one can say with truth that I ever rushed hot-headed into a quarrel, or used a weapon until my own life was assailed. I don't think it is a sin for a man to protect himself."

"Blood demands blood!" the girl cried quickly, springing to her feet as she spoke. "By your own act you have placed the avenger upon your path. Remember my warning. Within ten days at most you will die a violent death. Good-night."

And before Talbot could utter a word, she entered the other apartment of the shanty and closed the door behind her.

Talbot—cool as he was—was considerably astonished.

"It's deuced strange," he muttered; "this girl's face and voice are both very familiar to me, and yet I cannot remember where or when I have met her. There is something odd about this affair. She's forgotten her fee, too. I suppose that is a pretty good proof that she is more spiritual than earthly. I'll leave a five dollar gold-piece on the table for her. I think that that will be about the square thing. I doubt whether I got five dollars' worth of information out of her, though."

Then Talbot laid the gold-piece down upon the table and left the house.

As he walked carelessly down the road toward his shanty, whistling softly to himself, and in deep thought, he did not notice the three dark forms stealing along in the shadows cast by the shanties, and who were following closely behind him.

Deadly peril was nearer "Injun" Dick than either he or the fortune-teller dreamed of.

Hardly had the door of the shanty closed behind Talbot when the girl came rapidly from the other room.

She advanced at once to the table and took up the gold-piece which Talbot had left. She held it up in her fingers, and the flickering light of the candle fell upon the shining surface of the metal.

A strange look was upon the face of the girl.

"And this comes from him," she muttered; "from the man who before many days have passed will have found peace and rest in the cold, quiet grave. He laughs at my warning and rushes blindly to his fate. Is it then his destiny to die as I have predicted? Twice already he has escaped. The first time, because other hands threatened his life, and it is fated that he must die by one hand alone. And this is my fee!"

The lips of the girl curled, and she laughed low and mockingly; little touch of joy was there in that laugh.

Then she went to the wall and opened the shutter which served for a window.

Twenty feet from the shanty in its rear ran the river.

The moonbeams shining down upon the surface of the stream, decked it with countless lines of rippling light, while afar off the snow-white peaks gleamed cold and still bathing in the moonlight, and just below, the dark pines frowned down upon the rippling river like grim sentinels keeping watch and ward.

A moment the girl gazed at the wondrously-beautiful scene, looked at the cold, white peaks, gaunt pines and shining river; the incense of the trees filling the air with their strange odor; then she held the gold-piece up in the air, clasped between her thumb and finger.

A single instant the dark eyes gazed upon the gold as the white fingers held it; then, it went whirling through the air and sunk beneath the surface of the stream. Torn from the golden sands, it sought again its home.

"And as that metal sinks beneath the wave, so do I bury every spark of pity for this man. No act of mine shall save him from the death he has deserved!" she cried.

CHAPTER VI. THE LEATHER CORD.

Talbot proceeded down the street, retracing his steps to the Waterproof saloon.

"Where have I met this girl?" he muttered, communing with himself as he walked along. "I am sure that she is no stranger to me; but for the life of me I cannot remember when or where I have met her. The remembrance is more like a dream than reality. Her face is a peculiar one, and once seen is not easily forgotten. She knows something of my past life, too. It is not guess-work. She spoke of some hidden danger threatening me, but that may be only the usual cant of the fortune-telling trade." And Talbot's lip curled in contempt at the idea. Then a thought flashed through his mind, and he came to a sudden halt.

"By Jove!" he cried. "I guess now what she was driving at. It is just about a year ago when that difficulty at Barrel Camp occurred. That young stranger gave me just a year of life, and then swore that he would hunt me down to my grave. But, from that time to this, I have neither seen nor heard of him, and had almost forgotten the entire affair. While I hunt the outlaw, Rocky Mountain Rob, I in turn may be hunted. That's the way of the world. I must keep my eyes about me; not that I really care particularly whether I live or die, as this world at present has very few charms for me, but I don't care that any one shall be able to boast that they got the better of me when I was 'heeled' and ready for the attack."

Talbot again strode onward with a firm step. As the thoughts of the threatened danger passed

through his mind, involuntarily his hand had sought the handle of the revolver belted to his side, and concealed from view at the skirt of his coat.

Then suddenly, from around the corner of a small shanty, a man stepped forward into the moonlight as though meaning to dispute Talbot's passage.

Injun Dick halted instantly, and in a breath the moonlight flashed along the shining barrel of his leveled revolver.

"Hello, sport, don't shoot!" cried the stranger, holding up both hands to show that he was weaponless.

The man was a stoutly-built fellow, dressed roughly in the usual miner fashion, big boots, into which the coarse pantaloons were tucked, reaching above the knees, a dirty red shirt and broad-brimmed felt hat pulled down over the eyes. A huge yellow beard covered the lower part of the man's face, and the shadow of the broad-brimmed hat hid the rest.

Talbot did not relax his guard in the least; the revolver, cocked and leveled, still threatened the stranger.

"Say, let up, old man," continued the fellow; "that thing may go off, first thing you know, and drill a hole right through this cuss."

Then the stranger took a step forward as if to advance, but halted suddenly; good cause he had, too, for staying his onward motion, for the revolver of Talbot had risen to the level of his breast, and in a moment more the leaden ball would have plowed its way to his heart.

"Say, stranger, hold on your mule-team, darn your eyes! What the blazes do you want to draw a bead for on a feller wot don't want to get up any fuss with you?"

"Just you keep your distance, my friend," Talbot replied, quietly. "I don't know what you want and I mean to find out before you get within arm's length of me."

"I don't mean any harm," the stranger growled, sullenly.

"I don't say that you do," Talbot said, in his usual quiet way; "but I mean to understand what you want before I let you get any closer to me."

"Why should you think that I mean any harm?" the stranger asked.

"Why do you jump out into my pathway from behind the shanty like a Jack-in-a-box?" Talbot demanded.

"I didn't know that there was anybody 'round,'" the bearded fellow replied, in an injured way.

"You lie!" Talbot said, promptly.

"What!" roared the stranger, and he made a motion as if to draw a weapon.

"Steady, or I'll let daylight right through you!" Talbot cried, quickly. "This trigger works easy and my finger is a pretty heavy one."

"Say, you take an unfair shake," the stranger said, slowly, and in the tone of a deeply injured man. "I ain't 'heeled' for a fight. If I had a we'pon I'd go for you lively now, you bet!"

"You're lying again," Talbot said, contemptuously; "I can see the butt of a pistol sticking out of your belt now. You are 'heeled' as well as I. I know that you mean mischief by the way you came out from behind that shanty. I've got the 'drop' on you now, and I don't intend to give you any points in this game. Now you just turn your toes in the other direction or I'll put you in a condition to ride in the first coach of a first-class funeral to-morrow."

"Oh, you've got me, for sure," the threatened man said, sullenly, "and of course I've got to git."

Then a slight noise broke upon the stillness of the night.

Quick as thought, Talbot wheeled around; he guessed at once that danger threatened him from behind.

Too late the movement, for a lasso, thrown by a skillful hand, coiled down around his shoulders; the noose tightened, and Dick was hurled violently to the ground, his arms pinioned to his side as though held by iron bands.

A second more and three men sprung upon the fallen one, and quickly removed his weapons, then bound his arms securely behind him.

While the bearded stranger had held Talbot in conversation, the other two had come round the further corner of the shanty, and from the rear cast the lasso which had given Injun Dick a helpless prisoner into their hands.

All three of the men wore full beards, but even in the uncertain light cast by the moon, Dick at once discovered that the beards were false, evidently worn for the purpose of concealing the identity of the assailants.

Dick had not submitted without a desperate struggle, but the three, aided as they were by the iron gripe of the lasso which pinioned Talbot's arms so securely, were too much for him.

One of the first acts of the assailants after overpowering Dick had been to force a wad of cloth into his mouth and tie it there, thus preventing him from calling for assistance, had he been disposed so to do.

There was but little chance, though, of any one hearing his cries, even had he been able to have given an alarm, for they were in a remote part of the town, with only two or three shanties within ear-shot.

Night brawls, too, were common to Humbug Bar, and, as a general rule, people did not care to interfere in a quarrel not their own and run the risk of stopping a bullet intended for somebody else.

"I reckon that I've got the 'drop' on you, old hoss, after all," the yellow-bearded stranger said, in a tone of triumph, as he raised Dick to his feet.

"I'll go on ahead," said one of the men, who seemed to be the leader. Bring him along between you, and if we meet any one, I'll fix the job."

Talbot gave a slight start of surprise when the voice of the stranger fell upon his ears. The voice was singularly familiar to him; he was sure that he had heard it before.

Then the four went on—the leader in the advance and the two others, with Talbot between them, following in the rear.

Talbot made no resistance, but went quietly on. The sudden attack, the pains taken to make him a prisoner and to avoid harming him in the struggle, were all a source of wonderment to him.

If his assailants had a grudge against him, why did they not settle it on the spot and take his life there and then? Why did they bear him away a prisoner? and whither were they bound?

All these thoughts passed quickly through Dick's mind as they proceeded swiftly onward.

The little party left the Humbug Valley behind and plunged into a deep canyon, bending northward at a right-angle from the course of the Wisdom river.

Dark as midnight were the shades of the canyon, shut in as it was by the rocky walls and tall pines which crowned their summits. But the disguised men went on without hesitation, as though the path was perfectly familiar.

Suddenly the party halted. The man who had acted as a leader bound a handkerchief over Dick's eyes. Talbot wondered at the action, for an owl or a cat alone could have penetrated the darkness of the night.

Then the thought came suddenly to Dick's mind that they were about to leave the canyon and enter again the into light, and for the first time Talbot guessed the truth.

He was in the hands of the outlaw, Rocky Mountain Rob.

As Talbot's eyes were blindfolded, he was again conducted onward. A hundred paces onward and the little procession stopped.

Talbot's quick ears could just distinguish that a muttered conversation was being carried on, a few paces in advance. Others had joined the party.

Then again they went on. No longer the rough and stony way formed by the bed of the canyon, but a smooth and well-worn path that evidently had been worn by the tread of many feet. A narrow pathway, too, for they all proceeded in single file, and Talbot brushed every now and then against the solid rock on either side. He then knew that they were proceeding through some cleft in the mountain's side, rent asunder by the earthquake's fearful shock, and leading to the secret cavern which, report said, served as the refuge and treasure-house of the road-agents directed by the desperado known as Rocky Mountain Rob.

CHAPTER VII. JIM'S WOOLING.

BESSIE's heart beat fast, and the hot blood came surging to her cheeks, as she felt the slight pressure of York's arm around her waist, and his warm breath fanned her cheek. The girl would freely have given almost anything that she possessed to have been well out of the scrape; but, retreat now was impossible. She had courted the question and must answer it. York was not a man to be trifled with.

"Come, Bessie; I've asked you a question; ar'n't you going to answer it?" he said, in a low, deep voice.

"A question, Jim?" she murmured, in confusion.

"Yes; you know well enough what I mean. Don't pretend to misunderstand me; you're too smart a girl to try that dodge. Give a straight answer. Don't play with me. Folks say, Bessie, that I am not the kind of man that a wise head would take for a plaything. It would be like playing with edged tools; handle carefully, or there might be cut fingers round the board."

"But, Jim, I don't know much about you," the girl stammered.

"Well, I don't know much about you, either," he coolly rejoined. "So we are even there; but, for my part, I'm willing to go it blind. I don't think that if your worthy father, old Pop Shook, asked for a certificate of character from my Sunday-school teacher, I could give it to him. I couldn't even produce the register of baptism to prove that my name is really Jim York; but, I can put down ounces of gold-dust with any two-legged critter from here to Bannock city. What my past life has been is nobody's business. In this region we don't question a man's past life. If he calls himself John Smith, John Smith he is without question. I own two-thirds of the Waste-water Gulch strike, as rich a 'lead' as there is north of Bannock, and I don't take a back seat for a man in the Humbug valley. I love you, Bess, and I want you. I ain't a man that gives way much to sentiment; 'tisn't in my nature. I've dealt the cards just as coolly when all my pile was up as when I was playing for a broken-down mule. I am not generally blind, either, and I've had some little experience with women in the old time, before I emigrated for my country's good, and wore store-clothes and a b'iled shirt on Broadway. You have acted as if you cared something for me, and wanted me to know it. Now, Bess, spit it out; don't dodge the question; are you mine, or have I jumped another man's claim?"

The cheeks of the girl glowed like a furnace, and her breath came thick and fast. Despite the matter-of-fact tone of York and his careless words, there was an undercurrent of passion perceptible that frightened the girl. The volcano was crusted over by the lava coat, but the fires still burned fiercely beneath. She feared to rouse the volcano's might.

"Well, Jim, I didn't expect this," she answered.

"Oh, you didn't?"

It was only a simple sentence, but the intonation gave the lie to the girl as directly as though it had been framed in words.

"I mean that I didn't expect it so soon," she stammered, in confusion.

"Oh!"

The little exclamation was given with so much contempt that it wounded the girl more deeply than a torrent of bitter words would have done.

"Now, don't be angry with me, Jim," she said, imploringly, and the red cheeks grew pale, while an anxious expression appeared upon her face.

"Bess, I started out to play a square game with you, but you've rung a 'cold deal' in on me right at the jump," he said, bitterly.

"Why, Jim, I haven't," she said, reproachfully.

"Yes, you have, too," he answered, quickly; "you've been after me ever since I came to the Bar, and now that you got me foul, you pretend that you don't know any thing about it. Just answer me one question, though."

"I will, if I can," the girl said, humbly.

"Is there any man here that you do love?"

"Well, I—why do you ask such a question?"

"Because I'd send him to eat his hash where he wouldn't need a fire to keep him warm!" York said, with savage earnestness.

The girl grew paler still.

"But, Jim, I don't love any one at all."

"It's well that you don't," York said, meaningly.

"Now, Bess, I like you, with all your nonsense, and I've made up my mind to have you. I feel pretty sure that you like me now better than any one else, and when you do make up your mind to it, you'll love me. You can't fool with me as you have with the soft-heads that you've made game of ever since you came to the Bar. You've tried once too often, and this time your 'hand' ain't worth much, and I'm going to rake in the stakes myself. I'll treat you like a lady, dress you up like a princess, and maybe, some day, I'll take you East, and let you shine in the New York palaces. Diamonds won't look bad in your golden hair, my pet, and you shall have 'em, big enough, too, to make the New York 'sharps' turn pale with envy. I've got the 'open sesame' that shall split the rock, society, and give us entrance. My gold-dust will blind 'em. Why, gold will buy everything in New York, from the judge on the bench down to the bootblack."

The girl was startled by the fiery energy of York's words; here was a new phase of the gambler's character.

"Why, Jim, how you talk!" she murmured. She was fascinated despite herself. It was the charm of the serpent that binds the bird. Over her senses crept a strange lethargic feeling; her breath came short and fast; her bosom rose and fell tumultuously; her face burned and her heart beat; like one in a dream, she permitted York to wind his arms around her and draw her tightly to his breast; kiss after kiss he pressed upon her soft lips, still she resisted not. She was under a spell. The dominant nature had triumphed over the weaker one.

"You are mine!" he muttered, in triumph. "I press my seal of love upon your lips, and I defy man or devil to tear you from me."

Her senses reeling with strange passions, her head sunk down upon his shoulder; she was almost helpless, weak as a child.

Long and lovingly York looked upon the fair face nestled on his shoulder. The better angel of the man seemed to have taken possession of him, and the dark-winged messengers of fraud and rapine were for the time forced to fly.

One little glimpse of clear moonlight amid the clouded sky of Jim York's lawless life.

Then into that little dining-room, putting to flight the angels of peace and love, and bringing wrath and discord, came old Pop Shook.

Old Pop's naturally red face grew redder still when he beheld his treasure in the arms of Jim York, the gambler. He uttered an oath, which made it plainly evident that the host of the Waterproof saloon was fearfully excited.

With a slight scream, Bessie essayed to escape from the embrace of York, but, with a strong arm, he restrained her, and looked with calmness in the face of the angry father.

"Look a-here, York, what does this mean?" the old man cried, unable to keep still, and dancing about like a turkey on a hot plate.

"Well, Pop, I should think the position that your daughter occupies just now wouldn't call for much explanation."

"What have you been saying to my gal?"

"Just what you said to her mother a good many years ago," York replied, coolly.

"What!" the old man fairly screamed; "and, Bess, do you love this fellow—this gambler—this rascal?"

"Hold on!" York cried, quickly, in his clear, cold tones; "don't call names. It ain't for me to quarrel with you just now. As for my character, I guess it's about as good as any other man's in these diggings; and if it ain't, I'll just strike a new 'lead' an' make it as good. I love this girl, and she cares more for me than she does for any one else. I'm going to have her, with your consent, I hope, but have her anyway, if she's willing, if every man for forty miles around said no. That's my hand, Pop, and I always play my cards for all they're worth. Just talk this matter over and I'll see you again."

Then York released the girl and quitted the house, leaving old Shook in speechless amazement.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PRICE OF A WHITE SQUAW.

FOR full five minutes the old man glared around him, his mouth open and his face scarlet, while Bessie stood trembling before him; but, at last, he found his tongue.

"Bessie, I'd rather see you laid out in your grave-clothes than to see you the wife of that rascal!" he cried.

"Oh, father, don't be angry with me!" she exclaimed, her eyes full of tears; then she sunk down in a chair and began to sob as if her heart would break.

"Why, Bessie, how can you think of this fellow for a minute?" the old man asked, his anger cooling down at the sight of her grief.

"Oh, I don't know!" she moaned, between her sobs.

"Why, gal, he's a disgrace to the Bar; a cool, clear-headed scoundrel. Thar ain't an honest man in the Humbug valley that likes him. He ain't got no friends; he's only a card-sharp at the best."

"He owns the Waste-water Gulch mine," protested the girl.

"Well, I don't dispute that; he's got two partners, Kangaroo and Bill Rackensack, though; they run the mine; he don't sile his dainty white hands much; he'd rather sleep all day and gamble all night."

"But, Doc Kidder gambles too," Bessie persisted. She knew that Kidder was a particular friend of her father.

"Yes, but he ain't like York; he's a gentleman, he is. He couldn't run a mine, if he wanted to; his health ain't good. But he's a good squar' man. He don't cheat and he plays a fair game. He don't ring any greasy into a leetle game, and then rake him for all he's worth. He don't play keards with a revolver on the table and another one in his lap. Why, gal, ef the Vigilantes ever get started in this town, they'll string up that Jim York and his gang just as sure as the Wisdom runs into the Missouri."

"I know that people don't like him," she confessed, drying her eyes with her apron.

"And that's the reason that you do; that's a woman all over. Your mother couldn't b'ar the sight of me till her old man said that she shouldn't have me and drove me out of the house with a horse-whip; and arter that time she made up her mind fur

to have me anyway, jist to spite him. Now, I ain't a-going to be as big a fool as he was. You kin have the man ef you want to; you've got to live with him, not me. But ef you do have him, jist make him pull up stakes and git, 'cos I should hate to have to string him up to a pine some day, seeing that he was my darter's husband."

"But, father, I haven't married him yet."

"Well, you'd better, 'fore long, or there'll be some nice stories 'round about you. S'pose anybody else had come in and caught you a-hugging of him?"

"Why, father, I wasn't!"

"Well, he was you; same thing; 'tain't much difference." Old Pop was getting bitter. "You kin do jist as you please; I ain't a-going to lift a finger to stop you. I know that I couldn't ef I wanted to, and I ain't a-going to try. Jist go your own gait, but don't say that I didn't tell you, ef you marry him and wake up some fine morning and find your husband swinging with a rope round his neck from a pine tree with the warning of the Vigilantes pinned onto his breast."

The girl shuddered at the thought.

"I won't have anything more to say to him, father," she spoke with spirit and firmness.

"That's right," the father said, approvingly. "Thar ain't any good in that cuss, and the sooner he gits out of the valley the better it will be for the Bar. We've got altogether too many scamps here now. A man with two ounces of gold-dust ain't safe arter dark any more. I reckon that the Vigilantes will call on Judge Lynch to take a hand in the game and purify this town afore long if things get much worse than they are now."

"Do you think that a Vigilance Committee will be got up, father?"

"Jist as sure as shootin' gal," he replied, decidedly. "Things can't go on this way much longer. Poor Jimmy Collins was killed last night; jist knocked on the head for a few ounces of the dust he had with him, and one of the 'Johns' up near the Chinese camp was shot dead not a hundred paces from the main trail down the Wisdom."

"Perhaps 'twas Rocky Mountain Rob's road-agents that did it?" suggested Bess.

"Tain't likely; they go for the coaches and the express stuff—don't trouble the mines much; ef they did, it wouldn't be long afore we'd make the country too hot to hold 'em. Ef the Vigilantes do get their hands in they may clean out these fellows up in the mountains too."

"Oh, my!" and the girl sprung suddenly to her feet, "I'm letting those eggs be cooked all to rags!" and she proceeded to remove them from the fire.

"Who did you cook those for?"

"Jim York," she replied.

"Well, put 'em away and keep 'em; somebody may come in and want 'em," said the provident Shook.

"Big Engine eat eggs," said a guttural voice from the doorway.

Old Shook and the girl turned and beheld the Indian chief, known as Mud Turtle, standing in the passage. He was wrapped to the chin, as usual, in his dirty red blanket.

The Indian was no stranger to either father or daughter, for during the last few days he had been a constant patron of the Waterproof saloon. His visits, though, had been more frequent at the bar, where the fragrant fire-water was dispensed, than to the eating department of Pop Shook's hotel.

"Want something to eat, I s'pose, chief?" Shook asked.

"Ugh! Pale-face barefooted-on-top-of-his-head speak straight. Big chief—Mud Turtle—eat heap now, pretty soon, bimeby."

"Sit down in the other room, Injun; I reckon you kin pay for what you want?" Shook's motto was, no trust.

"Chief no pay, no eat," the Indian observed, with dignity.

"That's co-rect! Bess, jist fix something for the Injun."

The chief stalked into the dining-room and sat down at one of the little tables; Shook followed while Bessie prepared the ham and eggs.

The Indian looked at Shook stolidly but so steadily that the old man's attention was arrested and he guessed that the Indian wished to speak to him.

So when Bessie brought in the ham and eggs, and placed them on the table, Old Shook drew a chair up and sat down opposite to the Indian, as Bessie retired to the kitchen.

The chief surveyed the eatables, gave a grunt of satisfaction and proceeded to dispatch them. Then, his hunger satisfied, he wiped his mouth on his blanket, leaned over the table and laid his finger impressively on Shook's arm.

"Me, Mud Turtle in pale-face camp—drink fire-water—sleep anywhere—play poker—more white man than Injun."

"Yes," Shook assented.

"When chief goes north he wakes up; his tribes call him O-wa-he; he lead the Blackfoot braves on the war-path, and the scalps of the Crows hang thick in his wigwam."

"Is that so, chief?" Old Pop wondered what the savage was driving at.

"Mud Turtle—white Injun—is a skunk who drinks fire-water and lies. O-wa-he, Blackfoot chief, would not lie to save his life. His barefooted-on-top-of-head father has pretty squaw—the chief's lodge by the great river far off is cold—the chief wants squaw with eyes like sky."

To say that the old tavern-keeper was astounded would be but to faintly express it.

"What! give my gal to you?" he exclaimed, breathlessly and with wide open mouth, half-rising to his feet.

"No give; chief buy squaw," the Blackfoot replied, with dignity; "give white father one pony, two squaws, bag gold-dust," and the savage produced a buck-skin bag holding perhaps half a pound of dust, and opening it, exposed the yellow grains to the gaze of the old man, whose first impulse was to get angry, but a single glance at the face of his guest convinced him that the chief was in sober earnest and was conscious of no wrong in offering to buy the white maiden.

Then the ridiculousness of the offer struck him, and he roared with laughter, somewhat to the Indian's amazement. He watched Old Pop's face very narrowly, mentally calculating if he had bid high enough for the white squaw.

CHAPTER IX.

THE OUTLAWS "AT HOME."

ONWARD through the narrow passage for a hundred yards or more went Talbot and his capturers; then suddenly came a halt. The bandage was removed and Talbot looked around him, to see, as he had guessed, that he was in the cavern of the outlaw. The report then was true which said that the road-agents had a treasure-house in the mountains which served also as a refuge from pursuit in time of danger.

It was a natural cavern, lit up now by tallow candles stuck round upon the rocks, and no crevice appeared in the roof through which the daylight might penetrate. All was black as ink, except where the flickering light of the sputtering candles flared out from the rocky walls.

The chamber in which he was now (for Talbot guessed at once that the cavern branched here and there through the rock, as is common with such freaks of the earthquake's giant force) was some thirty feet long by twenty wide. At its further end rose some rock, pulpit fashion, over which a buffalo-robe was spread, and on the robe sat a dark-bearded man, armed to the teeth, and clad in the wild garb of the mountains, wearing a black half-mask, through which shone glittering eyes.

From the description which he had heard given of the man, Talbot at once recognized Rocky Mountain Rob, the merciless outlaw.

By Talbot's side were two of the bearded men who had aided in his capture. The upper parts of their faces were also concealed by black masks like the one worn by their leader.

The prisoner took in the situation at a glance. He was helpless in the hands of those who had every reason to take his life and none to spare it. But he wondered why he had not been stricken to death in the mountain gorges—why had all this trouble been taken to bring him a prisoner to that stronghold?

"Here we are, captain, with our bird," said one of the ruffians by Dick's side. He spoke in a hoarse voice, evidently disguised.

The person seated upon the buffalo-robe nodded and seemed for a few minutes to be engaged in surveying Dick; then at last he spoke.

"You are Dick Talbot, the sport from Bannock?" the masked man said, in a low voice, evidently disguised.

"Yes," Dick replied, with his usual confident air.

"I'm that very individual."

The moment the outlaw spoke, Dick became certain that he had heard the voice before.

"You made a rather foolish bet in Bannock city, the other day, if I have been rightly informed," the outlaw continued.

"I have made quite a number of foolish bets in my time," was Talbot's careless reply.

"But none as foolish as this one, or you would not be here now to say so. You bet a thousand dollars that you would bring the road-agent, Rocky Mountain Rob, alive or dead, into Bannock city, did you not?"

"Just what I did say."

"It was a stupid thing not only to put up a thousand dollars against an equal sum, but to throw in the chance of losing your own life. You have already lost; and now I suppose you are wondering why I have taken the trouble to bring you here, instead of having you killed at once the moment you fell into my hands?"

"Yes; that circumstance has puzzled me," Dick replied.

"I will explain to you my reason. When you made your bet, one of my agents stood by your side, and the bet was hardly offered and taken before another agent, mounted on a fast horse, was riding like the wind northward to bring me the news; and from the time that messenger reached me until your capture to-night, not a coach has rolled northward from Bannock city, not a 'pilgrim' has trod a trail leading to the Humbug valley, but my scouts have seen and reported. You came in no coach to Humbug Bar, nor by any footpath known to man. Now, tell me, how the deuce did you get into the town without my knowledge?"

"Perhaps some one of your spies has betrayed you?" Talbot suggested.

The teeth of the outlaw came down tightly together.

"By the Eternal! I'd cut his heart out if I could discover who it was that had played me false," Rob cried, fiercely. "I've had a man night and day on every mountain trail, in every gulch leading into the Bar. A full description of every man, woman and child has been brought to me. Now then, I want to know what hound has betrayed me. Tell me his name; give your oath to trouble yourself no more about Rocky Mountain Rob or his affairs, and I will let you go free."

Talbot shook his head.

"What?" cried the road-agent, in a tone of menace, "do you refuse my offer?"

"I regret that I cannot accept it," was Dick's reply. He certainly was not in the least agitated by the threatening manner of the outlaw.

"Why cannot you accept?"

"Because your men are faithful. My wits, being keener than yours, showed me a way into Humbug Bar which your spies did not and could not guard. I knew you would hear that I was on your track, and guessed that you would lay in wait for me. The first trick was mine; the second is yours."

"And I rather think that the game will end now, suddenly," the bandit chief remarked, with evident significance.

"While there is life there is hope," was the composed rejoinder.

For a few moments the outlaw was silent; he gazed at Talbot intently, as if to read the truth in his face.

"I think that you are deceiving me," Rob said, slowly. "I fully believe that some one of my band has betrayed me, and is in league with you. You would not have made so rash a bet had you not had some prospect of my capture. I'll make you an offer. I'll give you a thousand dollars and your life if you will reveal to me the name of your friend."

"Again, I tell you that I cannot," Talbot exclaimed, impatiently. "I have a friend who was to aid me in capturing you, but he never belonged to your band, and though I may die by your hand here, amid these rocks, yet my death-pang will be freed

from half its pain by the thought that my faithful friend will hunt you down and have your life even though you should try and escape your fate by flying to the very ends of the earth."

"Sometimes they call you Injun Dick?"

Talbot nodded assent to this unexpected question. "The Indians bear fasting well, they say," the brigand said, musingly.

Dick guessed his meaning, but did not speak.

"Do you know what I am going to do with you?" asked Rob, suddenly, finding that Dick did not not speak.

"Well, from the pleasant words with which you have greeted me, during this brief interview, I should judge that my death moment is approaching much more rapidly than is entirely agreeable. Talbot was provokingly deliberate.

"You're a cool hand," said Rob, impulsively. "But you're wrong. I don't intend to kill you at present. I'm going to find out what I want to know. You've got a tough will, but I intend to break it before I get through with you. I owe you a grudge, too, for we are not exactly strangers to each other, and I might as well clear off the score now as wait."

"I guessed that I knew you by your voice, although you have tried to disguise it," said Dick, with decision.

"It don't make much difference whether you know me or not. I know you, and that's quite sufficient. Now, then, I'll tell you what's in store for you, and your mind will be easy. I'm going to shut you up in a little hole in the rock, about big enough for you to turn round in, and there I'm going to starve you to death. When you feel the pangs of hunger gnawing at your vitals I rather think you'll be glad enough to beg for mercy."

"I'll bet you two to one, I don't!" Talbot cried, undauntedly: "and now I say you're a bigger fool than I took you for."

"Why so?"

"For not killing me at once. I shall escape from you, and then I'll win my bet, and carry you, living or dead, to Bannock!"

"That you'll never do."

"It's my life against yours now, and I'll win, sure!" Dick said, defiantly, as the two attendant ruffians advanced to remove him.

"Take him away!" The outlaw waved his hand in command.

One of the masked men took a candle from the wall, and led the way, Dick following unresistingly. The other masked bandit brought up the rear.

Through a narrow winding passage, a natural gallery in the rock, the three proceeded. A hundred paces on, they came to another but smaller vaulted chamber. This they crossed, and as they stood by the wall at the other end, two openings in the rock were perceptible. One, a broad and open passage, evidently the continuation of the gallery; the other, a mere hole in the rock, about two feet wide by four high; but, as the outlaw held the candle down by the entrance, the flickering light revealed that there was a small chamber beyond.

By the opening stood a huge boulder and a couple of crowbars.

"You're a big fool for not speaking out as our chief wants you to," remarked one of the masked men. "It won't be a pleasant death for you to starve in this hole."

"It will be some hours before that death will come!" was the cool rejoinder.

"Oh! you won't stand any chance of escape!" cried the other masked man. "After we put you in the cell, we shall pry this boulder up against the hole, and if you had the strength of twenty men, you couldn't stir it from its place."

"Things are mighty uncertain in this world," Talbot dryly reminded the ruffian.

"You won't find anything unsartin in this case," said the outlaw; "you'll find some old bones inside to keep you company. One of our gang tried to kill the chief once, but he got a ball through the ribs, and then we shut him up here to get well. I never heard a feller cuss as he did the first two days, or pray like him the last three. It was awful, I tell you."

And as he spoke, he thrust the candle near to Dick's face, to note the effect of his words; but Talbot's nerves were of steel; it needed more than words to shake them.

"It was horrible, eh?" Talbot queried.

"You bet it was!"

"Then you can judge how you will feel when you find the noose around your neck, and the Vigilantes swing you up to the branch of a tall pine tree," said Dick, with a smile.

"The Vigilantes will never get hold of me," protested the ruffian, sullenly, evidently startled by the suggestion.

"I'll bet you five to one you'll swing before you're six months older," Dick replied, confidently.

"You won't live to see it, anyway!" the road-agent retorted.

"I'll take you five to one on that, too," Talbot cried, quickly, the ruling passion of the gamester strong even in that hour of peril.

"Come, get in your hole! you've talked long enough," the second outlaw said, roughly, and he took the candle from the other, and, stooping down, entered the cavity.

Then upon the heavy air of the cave came a startling sound, familiar to every mountaineer.

'Twas the warning "whir" of the rattlesnake.

A single exclamation burst from the lips of the stricken man as he sprang back from the cavity, writhing with fear and pain. The outlaw had stepped directly upon the reptile, coiled asleep within the rocky passage, among the whitened bones of the man who had perished within that dark cell.

The candle, falling from the hands of the road-agent, was extinguished in an instant.

A moment, Talbot and his guard remained motionless, in the dense gloom, transfixed with horror. Then again came the fearful warning of the deadly serpent, which now had glided from the cavity.

With a yell of terror, both of the outlaws fled, unmindful of the prisoner, thinking only of escaping from the terrible reptile, which they could not see in the darkness.

Talbot could hear the outlaws stumbling over the rocks in their backward flight. A moment only he remained motionless. Surrounded by the dense darkness, he remembered the passage in the rock by the side of the cavity. Might it not be to him an avenue of escape?

CHAPTER X.

A NEW DEAL.

For a minute or two the old man laid back in his chair and roared in the face of the Indian.

A frown gathered upon the chief's stolid features, and with an angry gesture he wound the string around the neck of the buck-skin bag which held the gold-dust and swept it from the table, in disgust.

"Ugh! Big chief talk straight; white father make fool of Injun!" and the brave rose majestically to his feet.

"Hold on! Sit down, chief; don't get riled," cried the old man, trying to appease the evidently offended savage.

"Mud Turtle no like white father to laugh," said the Indian, gravely, and he resumed his seat.

"Of course—quite correct; but I couldn't help it; meant no offense, you know," Shook explained.

"Why white father laugh at Injun?" demanded the Blackfoot.

"Well, chief, the fact is, the idea of your offering to buy my gal struck me comical."

"Chief heap poor," the Indian said, anxiously; "give white father all he can for young squaw—two Injun squaw, one pony, gold-dust;—maybe chief give more dust—s'pose that buy squaw, eh?"

"Oh, you offer 'nuff, chief; that ain't the p'int," the old man explained.

"Squaw sold to 'nother chief? Mud Turtle take his scalp; then buy squaw—you bet!" The Indian had evidently used his ears since he had been hanging round the white man's camp, as this phrase proved.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Injun," responded old Shook, good-naturedly. "The fact is, we don't sell our squaws, as you red-skins do."

"No sell squaw?" said the Indian, slowly, and in evident astonishment.

"No; we give 'em away. When they see a fellow that they want to tie to, they jist spit it out to us, and then we say 'sail in,' and the two fix the affair up."

The chief was silent for a few minutes, evidently pondering over the words of the white man; then an idea seemed to flash across his mind, and he surveyed Shook, with a beaming smile on his dusky features.

"Maybe chief know now," he said, slowly. "Squaw wants to go with chief, white father say yes, too?"

This plain and straightforward question was a poser to poor Shook. He scratched his head for a moment; then he stroked his chin.

"Well—" he said, meditatively.

"Ugh!" and the Indian gave a grunt of discontent. "When Injun speaks straight, white father no answer," and his tone plainly betrayed that he considered himself aggrieved.

"Look a-her!" cried the old man, suddenly; "why don't you go and get a squaw out of your own tribe?"

"Chief got two now; wants white squaw bad," was the laconic reply.

"I don't believe that the gal would have you!" Shook exclaimed, just a little impatiently.

"White father means that he would not give her to chief at all?" The savage evidently was discontented.

"Well, chief, I r'ally own I should object."

"White father no take two squaws, one pony, gold-dust—ugh?"

"We can't trade," Shook replied.

Then the Indian sat and thought for quite a long time, while the other watched him with a comical grin.

Suddenly the Blackfoot bent over and laid his bony finger impressively on the old man's arm.

"Mud Turtle know 'nother way to get squaw."

Then from beneath the folds of his blanket he produced a dirty pack of cards, which he laid down on the table; then he pointed to them:

"Chief know?"

"Keerds!" and the old man nodded.

"Big Injun put two squaws, one pony, bag gold-dust up 'g'in little white squaw, play barefooted-on-top-of-head father poker—how's that for high?"

Old Shook stared with open mouth at the savage, as he made this offer.

"What?" he said, in utter astonishment.

"Flax white father like blazes!" the Indian said, sententiously.

"The devil you will!" exclaimed the landlord, his temper rather excited.

"White father no play—no lose white squaw; play—lose white squaw every time."

Old Shook did not relish the boasting words of the Indian. In his younger days he had been a mighty man at cards, and now, for this heathen savage to coolly announce to him that he could flax him like blazes with the "papers," was more than the blood of the old man could stand.

He glanced carefully out of the window, as if he was calculating the chances of anybody witnessing his movements; then he looked wistfully at the cards displayed so temptingly on the little table.

The Indian's keen eyes were fixed searchingly upon the other's face. He saw that he was yielding to the temptation, and a glitter, that told of anticipated triumph, shone in the dark eyes.

"I can't do it!" the old man muttered to himself. "I've jined the church, and it's ag'in' my principles to touch them devil's picture-books, but I would like to take the conceit out of this heathen, though, I swar!"

The chief noticed this indecision, and carelessly took up the cards. Shuffling them a few times, he then dealt the old man five cards, then himself five, and, as he returned the pack to the table, Shook saw that the under card was the ace of hearts.

The old man's eyes followed the Indian's movements, with an eager, hungry look.

"Let white father look at hand; maybe he play chief then," the red-skin said, gravely.

"I swar I'd like to flax the heathen," Old Pop muttered, and then, no longer able to resist the temptation, he took up the five cards and chuckled as he looked at them. He held four kings and a jack; a hand which only four aces could beat, and with his own eyes, Shook had seen that one of the aces was at the bottom of the pack on the table; therefore it was clearly impossible that the Indian could hold the four aces.

Shook looked searchingly at the savage. The In-

dian sat perfectly impassible; his cards lay on the table; he had not looked at them yet.

Again looking at his hand, he muttered: "I reckon that it won't be much of a sin, arter all, to take the conceit out of this pesky savage, jist for once."

"It's to be a straight game—the hands ag'in' each other jist as we hold 'em?" he demanded.

The Indian gravely nodded assent.

"I'll play on one condition, chief," said Shook, suddenly, as an idea occurred to him.

"White father speak—Injun do, p'haps."

"That ef I win, you'll give up your heathen religion and become a Christian?"

A slight smile played for a moment around the corners of the Indian's mouth, then he inclined his head gravely.

"Big Injun do as white father says, if white father win."

"I r'ally must flax him," thought the conscientious Shook.

At that moment Bob Shook and Johnny Bird entered the room, and were considerably astonished when they found the landlord of the Waterproof engaged in a little game with the Blackfoot chief, and were still more astonished when told what the stakes were on either side.

"Look out that the heathen don't flax you, father," Bob hinted in the old man's ear.

"He can't do it," whispered the old man. "It will take four aces to beat me and I see'd one on 'em at the bottom of the pack."

"Maybe he has let you see it on purpose and has rung in a 'cold deal' on you."

"I tell you I see'd it plain enough; I ain't a flat," the old landlord retorted, quite angry.

"White father ready, chief ready too," and the Indian seized up his cards.

"I'm ready; now it's a good fair game; you'll pay ef you lose?" Old Shook quivered, trembling with excitement.

"Chief pay—white father pay too?"

"Yes; there—four kings!" Shook slapped the cards down, in triumph, and reached for the bag of gold-dust, which the Indian had again placed upon the table.

"Wait!" said the Indian, laconically, covering the bag of gold-dust with his hand as he spoke. "Injun rake pile," and he deliberately laid four aces down on the table!

Shook grew scarlet with rage, and with a howl, he made a dive for the pack, turned up the bottom card, and it was the tray of hearts; the Indian had ingeniously concealed the two end spots with his thumb and finger when he had purposely let Shook see the card, so that the center spot alone being visible, it had appeared to the old man as the ace.

With a wolf-like yell, Bob Shook went over backward in his chair, as if he had suddenly been seized with a fit, while Johnny Bird pretty near strangled himself in trying to swallow the tablecloth.

Old Shook, with the tray of hearts clutched in his fist, stood in the center of the room, a picture of despair.

The Indian rose and folded his blanket around him, with an air of quiet dignity.

"Come for squaw by and by," he said, and then stalked out of the house.

We regret to say, that for full five minutes, old Pop Shook forgot that he had experienced "grace," and swore like a trooper, and then only regained possession of himself by seizing a barrel-stave and driving Bob and Johnny Bird, who were laughing like a couple of lunatics, out of the house.

CHAPTER XI.

THE COLONEL'S TROUBLE.

THE sun rose bright and early on the morning following the day when we first took up the tangled skein of life in the Humbug valley.

Colonel Jacks and Doc Kidder happened to meet in front of the Waterproof saloon.

Their errand was the same—a morning "cocktail," compounded by old Shook's skillful hand, to impart an appetite for breakfast.

Colonel Jacks was nervous and shaky; the lines on his face were deeper and sterner than ever, and his eyes were restless and bloodshot.

Kidder, on the contrary, looked as if he had just come out of a bandbox; his complexion was fresh and rosy, his mustache carefully waxed, and his step as elastic as a boy of twenty. Yet, Kidder was an older man than the veteran soldier, and had been up all night, too, indulging in a "little game" with some of the "sharps" from Get-up Gulch and Poor-shoot City, and to the credit of the Bar, be it said, Kidder had succeeded in flaxing the strangers out of all their loose gold-dust and had sent them back to their respective homes in figurative sackcloth and ashes.

"Good-morn'g, colonel," cried Kidder; "where you bound so early?"

"Going to get a little bitters before breakfast," the old soldier replied, hoarsely and nervously.

"See here, my dear colonel, you seem out of sorts this morning," and the gambler laid his hand on the shoulder of the other.

"I'll be cursed if you ain't right, Kidder!" the colonel cried, with a hollow laugh; "some fine morning the Bar will wake up and find that I've given 'em a chance to start a first-class grave-yard. I say, Kidder, it's cursed hard that a man who ought to have died on some battlefield, paying his debt to the country that educated him, should peg out like a miserable coyote in some rotten old shanty up in the mountains."

"Oh, not so bad as that, colonel; you're only a little nervous this morning, that's all."

"I tell you, sir, that this worthless old carcass won't waste good victuals much longer," the other said, dogmatically. "I say, Kidder, do you ever sleep?" he asked, suddenly.

"Why, of course," Kidder replied, switching some dust off the sleeve of his coat with his handkerchief. "How the deuce do you suppose I manage to live?"

"You generally play cards all night."

"Ah, true, but then I sleep all the next day. Gentlemen who follow my trade for a living are like 'owls—we prey by night and sleep by day."

"Kidder," cried the old soldier, suddenly, "I envy you!"

"You do? Why?" the gamester asked, in astonishment. "Men who trust to cards and dice to give

them their daily bread are not generally objects of envy."

"Kidder, fortune has a devilish sight more to do with men in this world than most people imagine," Jacks said, bitterly. "Now, take yourself, for instance; what made you what you are—a gambler?"

"Well, now, my dear colonel, that is what a lawyer would call a leading question. There's not many men at the Bar who would think of putting such a question to me, and precious few of them would get an answer."

"You needn't answer me if you don't like," said the old soldier, bluntly.

"Colonel, I should deem it an honor to answer any question that you might put to me," Kidder returned, quite seriously.

The soldier looked the gambler straight in the eyes for a moment, then extended his hand to him, and said, impulsively:

"I believe you, sir; I believe you, sir!"

"When I was about thirty years old I occupied a pretty responsible position, East; I got into difficulty and had to emigrate. From the force of circumstances I was obliged to find refuge in some country where no extradition treaty with the United States existed. I selected Brazil. A delightful country—snakes, scorpions and fever. The latter broke me to pieces. My money gone, and without friends, I nearly starved. Chance led me to one of the sailor drinking-houses frequented by foreigners. I saw the sailors gambling. I had always been an adept at all card games, for the fun of the thing, of course; and now I saw a chance to make a living; my health was so bad that I couldn't do hard work. Then and there I became a gambler, and have continued one ever since. I could easily defend my occupation by crying out that everybody gambles in this world, more or less, but that is only mere sophistry, springs to catch woodcocks."

"Kidder, you're a philosopher!" exclaimed the colonel, laying his heavy hand upon the shoulder of the other. "How many men would rest content as you have done? As for me, I kick against the traces all the time. Kidder, I believe that I've been the greatest fool that ever existed; curse me if I don't."

"Colonel, do you know that I've thought that way myself, a great many times, and from the little experience I had, I've come to the deliberate conclusion that almost every man thinks about the same thing of himself, sooner or later in his life."

"By Jove, sir, I believe you're right!" cried the colonel, emphatically. "Kidder, do you sleep?" he again demanded, suddenly.

"Why of course; I should be in my grave if I didn't."

"Curse me if I can; I mean, sleep as I used to when I was a young man. Now, sir, I have the most terrible dreams."

"Dreams!" Kidder ejaculated, and he flicked a dust-patch off his polished boot as he spoke. "I dream sometimes, but don't take much stock in dreams, colonel. I remember once I dreamed that I ought to back the jack of spades the next time I tried a hack at faro. I dreamed the same dream three times, colonel, and that, they say, surely signifies that it will come true. Well, colonel, I backed the jack of spades, and I lost two thousand dollars before I got through. I really consider that dreams are humbugs, colonel."

"I don't dream of the future, Kidder; I dream of the past," the colonel exclaimed, solemnly.

"The past!"

"Yes; all my past life comes back to me the moment I close my eyes. I go through all my trouble again. In the daytime I manage to forget all about it—so I do at night, for that matter—but the moment sleep comes, the phantoms of memory rise to haunt me." The troubled face of the old officer showed how deeply he was affected.

"Well, now, if I was going to prescribe for you, colonel, I should say, take a good stiff rum-punch before you turn in, and if one ain't enough, repeat the dose. I don't wonder, sometimes, at men becoming drunkards. Liquor does dull the brain, there's no question about that. It's a sort of mental suicide, though. It will break a man down in the end."

"Kidder, I never lay my head upon my bunk without being drugged with liquor. I'm pretty near a wreck, Kidder, and a woman has been my rock ahead."

"The deuce you say!" exclaimed Kidder, in astonishment.

"Yes; a woman with the face of an angel and the heart of a fiend. By Jove! Kidder, men wouldn't be half the villains they are if the women would only let them alone!" The colonel spoke with fierce emphasis.

A horseman riding up the street interrupted the conversation.

The stranger was a young man of perhaps two and twenty, mounted on a superb black horse. He was a handsome fellow, with jet-black hair and eyes, and a face almost as soft and fair as a woman's.

The colonel grasped the arm of Kidder in intense excitement as his gaze fell upon the stranger.

"Heavens!" he cried, breathlessly; "that boy is the very image of my wife!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE HEATHEN CHINEE.

"Your wife?" exclaimed Kidder, in astonishment. "Yes; the she-devil who ruined all my life and made me the wreck that I am!" The colonel spoke very bitterly.

The horseman dismounted, gave his animal in charge of the hostler, and entered the saloon.

"It's a wonderful resemblance!" exclaimed the old soldier, as the door closed behind the stranger.

"Looks like your wife, eh?"

"Yes; she was a young girl of French extraction that I married in New Orleans about twenty-seven years ago. She ruined me and then fled with a young French creole to Texas. I was stationed then at old Fort Arbuckle, on the Canadian river. I was in command of the post; the Mexican war had just ended. I chased the fugitives over the Texas line, leaving the fort to take care of itself. In my hot-headed rage I ran my command into a Kioway camp and fought three hundred of the red devils with thirty men, and beat them, too. The affair pretty near cost me my commission, though. Thanks to the Indians, my wife and her lover escaped. From that day I was an altered man. I drank to excess.

On the frontier it didn't make much difference. My comrades covered the matter up pretty well, but when the war broke out, I went into active service, and the first day I faced the rebels, with my regiment drawn up in line of battle, I was so drunk that I had to be held on my horse by my aids. The rebels whipped us like blazes; I lost four hundred men out of eight. That affair settled me. In consideration of my Mexican record, I was allowed to resign. I hid myself out here, a disgraced man."

"Hard lines, colonel," the gambler said, gently. "Cursed hard, sir. Why, when she fled with that young creole planter, she carried my child, sir, away with her."

"Did you ever see either her or the child afterward?"

"Never; I never even heard of them."

"It would be a strange piece of luck if this young fellow should be your son."

"That is impossible, sir; I never had a son."

"The child was a girl, then?"

"Yes—a little black-eyed thing; the mother all over."

"Possibly it's only one of those strange resemblances that sometimes occur. But come, colonel, will you join me in a morning eye-opener?"

The two men then entered the Waterproof saloon. The stranger had entered the dining-room, and, seated at one of the little tables, was waiting for breakfast.

Shook had sat down by the table and had engaged the stranger in conversation.

"From below, I reckon?" the old man queried.

"Yes; from Bannock city."

The voice of the stranger sounded very familiar to Shook, and he was cudgeling his brains to remember where he had met the young man before.

"Much of anything going on below?"

"No, not much."

"I didn't know but that you might have heard something as you came up the valley."

"Nothing."

The Chinaman who acted as Pop Shook's principal assistant now brought in the stranger's breakfast, and after placing it upon the table, lingered near, as if with intent to see if anything else was wanted.

The young man proceeded at once to attack the eatables.

"Pears to me that I've seen you somewhere afore," old Shook now remarked.

The stranger looked up in surprise.

"Your face and voice are mighty familiar to me," Shook continued, "yet I disremember whar I met you; I reckon you never were hyer before?"

"I'm from Walla Walla," answered the young man, resuming his eating.

"Well, I reckon I'm mistaken hyer," Shook said, doubtfully. "How might I call your name?"

"John Rimee," the stranger replied.

"Kinder odd name, ain't it—Rimee?" and the old man repeated the name, reflectively. "I reckon I never heerd a name like that afore. You must be a foreigner?"

"No, only of French descent. I was born in this country—in New Orleans."

"Oh, yes!" Shook exclaimed, "I've heerd of them French creoles."

"By the way, landlord," said the young man, suddenly, "do you know a man called Talbot—Dick Talbot?"

"Well, now that you speak of it, it pears to me that I've heerd of a fellow by that name somewhar," the old man said, thoughtfully. "Is he a miner?"

"No, he's a gambler who used to live in Bannock city, but I believe he's up in the Humbug valley, now."

"Oh!" exclaimed the old man, "I remember, now. I heerd Bob speak of him; Bob's my son; he's the express rider 'tween hyer and Beaver city. But I reckon that this Mister Talbot ain't anywhar 'round hyer. I should have heerd of him sure."

Then there was a call made for Shook from the other room, and the old man withdrew.

"Strange that the old man does not know anything about him," the young man muttered; "he has been here in this very house, I am sure. Possibly he assumed another name."

"Melican man wantee somee more?" said a strange voice, close by the stranger's side. He looked up and saw that the Chinaman had approached and stood by the table, with a broad grin upon his olive face.

"No, thank you, John; I've got all I want," the young man replied. On the Pacific Slope all natives of the celestial nation bear the common name of John.

Then the movements of the almond-eyed son of the flowery nation excited the wonder of the young stranger. The Chinaman crept cautiously to the door, listened for a moment, then returned to the table and bent down mysteriously.

"Wantee see 'Melican man, Talbee?" This was as near as the celestial could come to the name of Injun Dick.

"Yes!" exclaimed the young man, eagerly.

"What you givee me?" asked the Chinaman, shrewdly.

The young man took a gold dollar from his pocket and held it up.

"Me tellee for dollee," the celestial said, tersely.

"Go on."

"Melican man callee heself Smithee."

Rimee nodded to let the heathen see that he understood him. As the young man had guessed, Talbot had been passing under an assumed name.

"Givee dollee!" and the Chinaman extended his hand.

"Hold on a moment, my friend," Rimee said, holding the coin out of the reach of the other; "you haven't quite earned your dollar, yet. Where is this man now?"

The celestial hesitated for a moment.

"Me don't knowee," he replied, at last.

Rimee was convinced from the manner of the man that he was not speaking the truth. He did not say so, but quietly returned the dollar to his pocket-book and commenced eating again.

The Chinaman heaved a deep sigh when the gold-piece disappeared. Then he went to the door and listened again, then came back.

"Me do knowee; me 'fraid tellee," he said, in a whisper.

"Speak and the dollar is yours," And again Ri-

mee held the yellow gold-piece up before the eyes of the celestial.

"Me tellee," the Chinaman said, decidedly, but with a cautious glance around him.

"Go ahead then and be quick," Rimee said, impatiently.

"Melican man, face hidee—throwee lasso; takee Talbee 'way off in mountains."

Rimee started in amazement as the intelligence fell upon his ears. If the heathen spoke the truth, Talbot was in the hands of the road-agents!

"How do you know that this is so?" the young man asked, sternly. The thought occurred to him that perhaps the wily son of the East was lying in order to possess himself of the gold dollar.

"Chinee man comee 'long road—see 'Melican man hidee—he hidee too. No likee 'Melican man's face hidee. See muchee—no tellee. 'Melican mans killee John."

"How many were there with their faces hidden?"

The celestial held up three fingers.

"You are not lying?" Rimee cried, sternly.

"John no lie—how could he?" said the celestial, in an injured tone.

"There's your dollar."

The eyes of the heathen glistened as his fingers touched the gold-piece, and straightway he departed.

"Talbot must be saved, no matter what the cost!" the stranger cried, with compressed lips and an angry frown.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STEP IN THE DARK.

With a desperate effort Dick freed his wrists from the bonds that bound them, then, with outstretched hands, advanced. It was a fearful moment of suspense, for he knew not but that each step might bring his feet upon the rattlesnake, to feel it strike into his flesh.

The tide of luck was with Talbot this time, however, for he managed to gain the passageway without encountering the snake.

With outstretched hands he groped his way along in the darkness, stumbling every now and then over the rocks which obstructed his way. The passage wound like a serpent's track through the rock, and Talbot's hands bore many a bleeding gash where they had come in contact with the jagged walls ere he had proceeded a dozen yards.

Whither he was going he knew not; he stumbled blindly on. Of one thing alone he was certain; behind him were the merciless outlaws who had doomed him to death; before him, a possible chance of escape. He knew full well that the road-agents would soon be in hot pursuit, so he hastened onward with all the speed that he could muster.

Wild with terror, the outlaw, who had so narrow an escape from the rattlesnake, stumbled his way through the darkness back to the chamber which, among the outlaws, bore the name of the "council-hall." The stricken man had fallen, scarcely a dozen paces from the spot of his disaster.

Rocky Mountain Rob and some five of the road-agents, their masks laid aside, were in consultation when Talbot's guard, his fingers bleeding from contact with the sharp edges of the rocky passage, burst breathlessly into the light. Seizing their weapons, all rose in alarm—their first thought being that they had been surprised in their stronghold.

"What's the matter?" demanded the chief.

"Bandy's bit by a rattlesnake!" cried the man, in horror.

"A rattlesnake!"

"Yes; it was coiled up in the cell, and when Bandy went to put the prisoner in, the cursed thing struck him."

"And Talbot?" Rob questioned.

"I guess the snake went for him, too; I heerd the thing rattle for a second strike."

"You blundering fool; he may have escaped!" cried Rob, in wrath. "And if he succeeds in getting out into the open air, he'll bring the whole country down upon our hiding-place."

"If he has got away from the snake, he'll never be able to get out; the devil couldn't find his way out without a guide in the darkness," the man protested, doggedly.

"Take the lights and come at once!" commanded Rob, rising, as he replaced the mask upon his face. Seizing a candle, he advanced to the passageway—the band all following.

Through the winding passageway they hastened. The flickering light of the candles dimly illuminated the darkness of the cavern.

Soon they stood by the side of their companion, now writhing in agony.

"What's the matter, Bandy?" questioned Rob.

"A rattlesnake bit me, captain," moaned the outlaw; "I kin feel the poison swelling in my veins."

"Take him away, two of you; cut out the bite with your knives, burn the spot with a hot iron, then fill him with whisky. Let him drink all he can—a quart, if his stomach will hold it—and the rest of you come on with me."

In obedience to this command, two of the road-agents carried their comrade away, while on through the winding gallery in the rock went the rest of the road-agents, intent upon hunting down the human prey.

By the dim light of the candles they could easily trace the footsteps of the fugitive in the clear white sand which formed the floor of the cave.

"Where does this passage lead to?" demanded Rob, as he led on the trackers.

"Nowhar, capt'in; it goes chuck into the rock," replied one of the men. "It's durned queer that we don't hear any thing of him."

"He's hiding in some corner, perhaps?"

"There ain't a corner for him to get into," said the outlaw; "it runs right chuck into the rock. I was down hyer onc't."

The pursuers went straight on; they had ceased to track the fugitive by his footsteps in the sand, as it was plainly evident that he must have gone directly onward.

The passage was scarcely wide enough to permit two persons to walk abreast; it twisted to the right and then to the left, and a hundred yards further on ended abruptly, the way barred by the impenetrable rock.

The outlaws paused in astonishment; they had not brought the fugitive to bay, as they had confidently expected.

"The devil seize him!" cried the chief, in a rage; "where can he have hidden himself?"

The road-agents gazed at each other with blank faces. The disappearance of Talbot was incomprehensible—ay, miraculous.

"Perhaps he didn't come this way?" suggested one of the band, anxious to account for the strange event.

"Didn't we trace his footsteps in the sand?" cried Rob, angrily.

"Let us go back and track him carefully," suggested another.

"A fine chance we'd have of tracking him now, by his footsteps in the sand, after we've trampled like a drove of wild horses over the trail," said Rob, sarcastically.

"I have it, cap'n!" cried one of the men; "he came as far as this and then turned back into the prison cave again."

"Perhaps so," answered Rob, thoughtfully; "but if he did so, he cannot escape us, for there is but one road from the prison chamber, and that leads directly to the council-hall; and even if he has got as far as that, he can go no further, for the rest of the band are in the outer chamber beyond."

Then they retraced their steps; but, though they searched carefully through the vaulted chamber, and even looked into the stony cell which had been designed for Talbot's coffin and tomb, no traces of the man could they find.

The rattlesnake, too, had disappeared; the reptile had retreated into some crevice of the rock, secure from observation.

The band returned to the council-chamber, and there they found other members of the gang, so it was clear that the fugitive had not come that way.

The outlaw chief was indeed terribly enraged at the escape of Talbot, for now it was life against life!

"He must be within the cave somewhere, boys!" the chief exclaimed. "There must be no rest for us until we find him, or discover in what way he has contrived to avoid our search. I thought every corner of the cave was known to us, but there must be some secret passage in the rocks which has escaped us. So, provide yourselves with candles, and some of you make torches of the pine boughs. We'll explore the passage again."

Aided by the lights, they searched high and low, but, as before, they found no trace of the fugitive—no secret passage in the rock.

"That man must be Satan or one of his imps," Rob cried, in anger, as the men gathered in the council-hall, after their fruitless search.

The brigand chief now dispatched three of his trustiest men to patrol the canyons near to the mouth of the cave.

The mind of the mountain brigand was very ill at ease. If Talbot succeeded in escaping, and bore away with him the secret of the cave and the means of entrance thereof, good-by to the safety of the stronghold of the road-agents! The mountain cavern would be more likely to prove their tomb, than their fortress.

And Talbot—keen-witted, strong-armed Injun Dick, strange blending of the iceberg and the volcano—how had he escaped from the toils of his terrible foes?

In blind haste, he had dashed onward in the darkness, not knowing whether the passage would lead, whether to freedom or to death.

The sharp rocks tore his outstretched hands until the red drops dripped from the white fingers, but onward he went—behind him, certain death; before him, uncertain chance.

Talbot felt that he could not keep up the terrible pace much longer: his breath was coming thick and fast, and the great sweat-drops rolled down his forehead, when, suddenly, both hands came in contact with the surface of the jagged rock, and the terrible knowledge that he had gone to the end of the passage flashed upon him in an instant.

With the quickness born of desperation he tried the surface of the wall with his hands as high as he could reach, in hope to find some opening leading into another gallery like in nature to the first; but vain was the trial. He felt that he was caught like a rat in a trap. He had received but a respite, not a pardon.

Strong man though he was, Talbot groaned aloud in agony. Then to his ears came a dismal sound. Full well he understood the meaning of that noise. The road-agents, alarmed by their confederate, were even now upon his track, with intent to drag him back to that damp tomb from whence the poisonous reptile had saved him.

The distant sound of the outlaws' tread resounded, hollow and dismal, among the arches of the vaulted passage, and grew more and more distinct as they came nearer and nearer.

Then the thought came to the mind of the hunted man that, perhaps, in the passageway along which he had come there might be some crevice in the rock wherein he might hide, and thus for a while escape the search.

And so, while the road-agents paused for a moment by the side of their comrade, stricken down by the fangs of the rattlesnake, Talbot, with eager, trembling hands, sought along the wall on either side for a place of concealment. It was a fearful risk, for each step that Talbot took brought him nearer and nearer to the men who were hunting him down, thirsting for his blood.

"Heaven aid me!" cried the desperate man, in wild despair, as step after step brought him nearer and nearer to his enemies, and his hands fell only on the cold surface of the solid rock.

Ten short and feverish steps the fugitive takes; twenty times the jagged wall tears his nervous hands; then, with the curses and shouts of the outlaws ringing in his ears, as they again advance on the chase, he catches his foot against a projecting rock and falls headlong to the ground. The fine sand cuts his face and chafes his mouth and nose; he heeds not that; he is conscious of one thing only; his right hand, extended sideways, strikes, not the solid rock, but empty air!

Oh, joy! Level with the ground, not a foot from his head, is a rounded cavity through which his body can pass.

He thinks not of what may be within—that perhaps he comes uninvited to the home of the rattlesnake; that the crested serpent may, even as he enters, be coiled in deadly folds ready to strike its fangs into his flesh; he thinks only that the foe is on

his track, and while their feet are treading the sands of the gallery, and the flickering light of their candle pierces the gloom not ten paces from him, he drags himself through the cavity, and discovers that there is room for him to stand upright. He rises to his feet, and while, with oath and shout, the road-agents go trooping by, separated from him only by a foot of rock, with an exultant laugh he steps forward in the darkness. A single step only, and then the laugh turns to a cry of terror, for he has stepped into empty space, and wildly clutching at the air, he goes down, down into that awful pit.

CHAPTER XIV.

JOHN RIMEE.

THE young stranger, who had called himself John Rimee, paid Shook for his breakfast and then left the house. Colonel Jack, who had watched the young man intently while he was paying, followed him.

Rimee called to the hostler to bring out his horse. He evidently was ill at ease, and started with a nervous shiver when he turned and found the old soldier at his elbow, apparently watching him.

"A fine morning, sir," the colonel said. "Yes, sir," returned the stranger. He did not like the scrutiny of the ex-officer, but a certain air of command—of dignity—in the ex-colonel's bearing, had its weight.

"A stranger in the Bar, I take it?" the colonel said.

"Yes," answered the stranger, just a little abruptly.

"I trust, sir, that you will pardon my questions," the soldier continued, with stately dignity, mingled with a hauteur that was natural to the man, a gentleman by birth and breeding.

"Oh, certainly," the young stranger said, impressed, in spite of himself, by the colonel's manner.

"I assure you, sir, that it is no idle curiosity. I question you, sir, because your face is strangely familiar to me. It recalls events which years ago shaped the whole current of my life."

The stranger listened attentively, and just a slight frown gathered on his brow. From under his long lashes he looked searchingly at the face of the colonel, as if he was striving to recall something from the past.

"I am sure, sir, that I shall be pleased to afford you any information in my power," the young man replied after quite a pause. It was as if he had been deliberating what to say.

"If I may take the liberty to ask your name?" the colonel added. He was strangely agitated, and his usually cool gray eyes were snapping, and the pale lips were trembling under the short, bristling mustache.

"John Rimee."

"Rimee—Rimee!" the old soldier repeated, slowly. He shook his head, thoughtfully. "That's not the name," he muttered to himself.

The young stranger did not hear the muttered sentence, but evidently guessed its meaning, for a lurid light shone in his dark eyes, and an ugly, scornful smile curled the corners of his proud lips.

"I beg your pardon again, but is your father living?" the colonel asked, raising his blood-shot eyes, to the face of the young man.

"No, sir."

"Dead?"

"Yes, sir."

The colonel seemed bewildered; he had but repeated the question, yet he did not seem conscious of it.

"Dead—he dead and I live?" The soldier passed his hand vacantly across his forehead, then pulled the long ends of his mustache, which he wore after the French fashion. "It is not his name, and yet I am sure that it is *her* son; voice, eyes, hair, all alike," he muttered.

The young man waited patiently; there was a peculiar, half-hidden smile, which vanished when the old colonel looked him in the eye.

"Is—is your mother living?" It cost the old man a throb of pain to put the question, though long years had come and gone since he had seen the woman to whom he guessed that his question referred.

"My mother died twenty-six years ago," replied the young man, slowly and distinctly; and while he spoke, his quick, black eyes never left the face of the colonel, and they seemed to rejoice when a look of pain appeared upon that face.

"Died twenty-six years ago!" the colonel muttered.

"Yes, sir, in France, where I was born."

"France—twenty-six years ago. I was mistaken, then," the colonel said, disjointedly. "I really beg your pardon, sir; I perceive that you are not the person that I took you to be. I am sorry, sir, that I have troubled you with my questions, and I trust that you will excuse me. I am not quite so young as I once was."

With graceful dignity the old man delivered the explanation.

"Don't mention it, sir; I am sorry that I am not the person you sought." The young man spoke kindly. His horse was then brought, and he mounted and rode slowly away, while the old man watched him with a troubled expression upon his face.

"I cannot understand it. I would not believe that it is possible for any human being in this world, except her child, to possess that face. When I looked into his eyes, hers again rose up before me, soft in their melting tenderness, bright in their liquid fire. By Jove! I believe that I am in my second childhood! The voice, too; exactly the same; every tone alike!"

A gentle hand was laid upon the colonel's shoulder, which roused him from his abstraction. He turned and beheld Doc Kidder, who had just come from the Waterproof saloon.

"Ah, Doc, is that you?"

"Yes; you seem all in a heap."

"Enough to make me, Doc," the colonel replied.

"You remember the young man who rode up the street just before we went to take our cocktails?"

"Yes; the young fellow with dark eyes that you said was the very image of your wife?"

"Precisely. Well, I've just had five minutes' conversation with him."

"Ah?"

"Yes; I could not resist the temptation to speak to

him, for the likeness was so wonderful that I felt sure that he must be her child."

"And was he?" Kidder asked, carelessly.

"No, no. He told his name, and said that his mother died in France twenty-six years ago."

"His name was not the one that you expected to hear?"

"No; nothing like it. I thought that he was her child, but that he would bear the name of the man who stole her away from me. The man whom I once swore that I would kill, even if I had to hunt him through the world, and take all the years of my life for the task."

A quiet smile came over Kidder's face; he had his own ideas in regard to killing men for such uncertain pieces of property as women.

"You are sure, then, from his statements to you, that this gentleman is not the person you thought he was?"

"Yes."

"Now, my dear colonel," and Kidder laid his arm caressingly upon the shoulder of the other, "I hope you won't be offended, but, standing in the doorway yonder, I overheard all the conversation that passed between you and this young stranger, and I did what you neglected to do, kept a close watch upon his face. I feel morally certain that he has lied to you all the way through."

"The deuce you say!" said the colonel, in wonder.

"Fact! I watched his eyes, and the corners of his mouth. He exhibited a great deal more interest than a mere stranger would have taken in your questions."

"How shall I discover the truth?"

"That's a difficult question to answer, my dear colonel," Kidder said, thoughtfully. "By Jove, I have it!" he cried, after a pause; "consult the fortune-teller, who has hung out her shingle at the Bar."

"I'll be shot if I don't, sir!" cried the ex-officer.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ORACLE.

"Yes, sir; I'll be shot if I don't consult the fortune-teller," the colonel repeated, emphatically; "not that I take much stock in any such humbug; but I'll do it just to see what she'll have to say about this affair."

"I'll go with you, colonel," Kidder said; "I want a little information myself. I've had an unusually good run of luck lately, and I'd like to see what she'd predict for the future. One of the Johns over at Chinese Camp has started a little bank; and, as a good white man, I think it's my duty to suppress gambling among the heathen, so I've been thinking about going over to the camp and breaking that bank ever since it was in operation."

"What is it?—monte?"

"Yes, a monte bank."

"Let's have our breakfast first and then we'll go for the fortune-teller."

The two adjourned to the dining-room of the Waterproof, eat their breakfast and sallied forth to consult the oracle of fate in the person of Colomba Merimee, "Fortune-teller."

The two were doomed to disappointment, though, for the Chinaman who came in answer to their call informed them that the fortune-teller was absent and would not be at home until evening.

"We'll have to wait then, colonel," Kidder remarked, as they retraced their steps.

"I shall call again to-night," the colonel declared; "since I've gone so far, I will go further."

"I'm with you; we'll go after supper."

"All right; which way are you going?—to the hotel?"

"Yes, I want to get a little sleep; I was up all last night, you know. It's really my duty as a citizen of the Bar to smash that bank at Chinese Camp," said Kidder, abruptly. "The Bar is the metropolis of the valley, and if there's to be any bank located, this is the place. Those Johns and their monte bank must be bust up or we shall be ruined by Chinese cheap labor; well, good-day, colonel."

"Good-day; I'm going down to the mine."

And so the two parted.

The colonel went down to the mine by the bluff to superintend the putting up of a new flume designed to give a greater head of water, while Kidder went to the Waterproof saloon, where he had his headquarters. There he threw himself on his bunk and slept for two or three hours, then got up and amused himself with a pack of cards, trying various combinations, all designed to reduce the odds of chance to a basis of certainty.

When the great red sun sunk slowly down behind the tall white peaks of the Big-horn mountains, which fringed the western sky, and the clear waters of the Wisdom, rippling over the yellow sands of the Bar, began to cloud over with the dark shadows of the pines growing along the eastern bank of the river, the busy hum of toil, from the human hive nestled by the banks of the mountain stream and in the canyons and gulches ranging from it, grew less and less. The waters no longer played against the bluff-side, washing down golden-laden earth in great masses into the sluice-ways and the "rock-ers" below. The sound of the blasting charge and the drilling pick tearing the quartz rock from its resting-place in the mountain's side ceased.

One by one the brawny miners, hardy sons of toil, came trooping into the Bar, intent upon bartering their hard-earned gains for the toil-sweetened bread of life or potent tanglefoot whisky.

Some came to seek beneath the canvas tents or boarded shanties for the needed rest after their day of toil; others to indulge in the fascinating game of poker, or to watch the rattle of the dice at the scientific chuck-a-luck.

And, to the disgrace of the Bar, be it said—quite a large number of "pilgrims" wended their way up the stream to the Chinese Camp, all intent upon bucking the Johns' monte.

News travels quickly in the mountain region, and four-and-twenty hours after the first miner retired "broke" from the monte-board, the fact that such a "bank" was running in the Chinese Camp was known in every mountain mining gulch, from Humbug Bar to Geyser Spring.

After supper, Kidder and the colonel started for the fortune-teller's shanty.

On their way thither, Kidder encountered quite a number of his acquaintances; one and all, almost without an exception, announced that they were

going to take a stroll up the Wisdom as far as the Chinese Camp, "maybe."

"They'll either break that bank before I get there or else it will be so cussed strong as to oversize my pile," Kidder remarked, just as they got to the door of the shanty which bore the legend, "Colomba Merimee, Fortune-teller."

As before, the Chinaman answered the knock. This time, however, he invited the visitors to enter, in the choicest "pigeon English," as the sage who read the future was at home.

Kidder and the colonel were shown by the heathen into the main room of the shanty, and asked to sit down.

"Commee soon," the celestial said, and then retired.

A candle was burning on the table and cast its dim light over the room.

A common pine table and two chairs comprised the furniture.

"Not a particularly elegant 'lay-out,' colonel," Kidder remarked, after a glance around.

"No; Spartan simplicity."

"No stuffed owls, serpents, or sable hangings to prepare the minds of the unbelievers to receive the dread secrets of futurity," Kidder continued.

"No; I wonder at it too, for such mummery generally has great effect upon the untutored mind. Imagination goes a great way in this world. Prepare a man to expect a certain result, lead him to believe that he will see it, and he'll try very hard to do so even if he don't."

"Quite correct, colonel; but I rather think this oracle of fortune who bears the romantic name of Colomba couldn't find two tougher subjects to impress with her supernatural knowledge than you and I, colonel."

"Yes; we're both in the 'sere and yellow leaf,' and in our time have seen a little of the world."

"Men wise in their own conceit sometimes fall an easy prey to the power that perchance they may despise," said a voice close their elbows.

Kidder and the colonel looked and beheld a woman, clad in a dark dress and closely veiled, standing by their side. She had entered so noiselessly that they had not noticed her approach.

The two men looked at the veiled woman with curiosity. She was slender in figure, and tall and straight; young, too, the outlines of her figure clearly decided that.

The tone of the woman's voice astonished both the colonel and Kidder; there was a masculine ring to it; it was as if a man was striving to imitate a woman.

"Well, gentlemen, what would you with the fortune teller?" she asked, finding that they did not speak.

Now, truth to tell, both Kidder and the colonel were a little taken aback, as a sailor would say, by the sudden and unexpected appearance of the veiled woman, and they felt a little nettled that she should have overheard their words.

The fortune-teller had taken them at a disadvantage.

"Well, colonel, will you proceed first, or shall I?" Kidder asked.

"You first, Doc Kidder!" cried the woman, imperiously, without giving the old soldier time to reply. "I can give you all the information you require in ten minutes, while I shall have much to say to this gentleman," and with her finger she indicated the colonel as she spoke.

The two men looked at each other; the fortune-teller had succeeded in astonishing them already.

"Go ahead, Kidder, I'm in no hurry," the colonel protested.

"All right, and now, miss or madam, whichever may be your state in life," Kidder said, rising and addressing the veiled woman, who stood motionless as a statue by the table, "I propose to test your power by asking you a few questions."

"There is no necessity for you to question me," the woman remarked, sharply, and again the masculine ring came out, clear and strong.

"Oh, you can tell my thoughts, then, without my putting them into words?" Kidder said, lightly, and there was a strong expression of unbelief upon his face, visible even in the dim light which pervaded the room.

"You doubt?" the fortune-teller queried, somewhat scornfully. "Listen then and be convinced. You wish to know whether you are to be lucky or unlucky; whether you will break the *monte-bank* just started at the Chinese Camp, or lose your own gold-dust in the attempt?"

Despite Kidder's coolness he could not prevent a slight expression of astonishment from appearing upon his face, while the colonel, less used to concealing his emotions than the practiced gamester, looked utterly astounded.

CHAPTER XVI.

DIGGING UP THE PAST.

KIDDER, naturally superstitious, like all men who trust to games of chance for their fortune, began to really ask himself if this veiled woman could possibly possess a knowledge of the future.

"Am I correct?" the fortune-teller demanded.

"Yes, that is exactly what I want to know; your guess is singularly correct," Kidder said, gracefully concealing his surprise.

"Do not try to break the bank; you will only lose your gold-dust!" the woman spoke decidedly.

Kidder looked annoyed.

The woman noticed the expression upon the face of the gamester in an instant.

"If you doubt my words, go and try your luck, and, if the wily Celestials rake in your dust, perhaps then you'll believe that the fortune-teller can read the future."

"Well, miss, I shall try before midnight whether your prediction be correct or not," Kidder retorted, with just a tinge of spite in his tone.

"Like the moth, you will fly into the light, even though the flame singe your wings," she said, in sarcasm.

"Oh, no; I'm more like the bat, in this case, whose wings flap out the light," Kidder answered, with a smile.

"You'll never break that bank!" the woman exclaimed. "The Chinamen know too much for you!"

"For ways that are dark," etc., hummed Kidder. "Oh, I don't fear. But, if you are correct, I shall be sorry. It will be a burning disgrace to the Bar if

there's a Chinese *monte-bank* which can't be broke by a decent white man."

"You are a scholar, are you not?" demanded the woman, suddenly.

Kidder was a little astonished at the question.

"Well, yes, I presume that I may be termed an educated man, if that is what you mean," the gamester replied.

"Call back to your memory the history of the intercourse of the Western nations with the so-called barbarians of the East—the sons of further Ind—the land of Prester John. In cunning the East has always beaten the West, and yielded only to the strong right arm of power. Here, amid these mountains, the story of the past will be repeated."

"I think I get your meaning," Kidder said, thoughtfully. "What the Johns win by the trick of cards, some desperado will wrest it from them by main force."

"Yes."

"Well, I believe that I have got all the information that I desire. If they break me to-night up the stream, I shall begin to believe that you are not a humbug but a genuine prophet. How much?"

"Five dollars."

Kidder handed over the money.

"I'll see you in the morning, colonel; good-evening, miss," and Kidder departed.

"Hang me if the woman hasn't made quite an impression on me," he muttered, as he walked up the street. "I wouldn't have believed it possible." Then he examined his bag of gold-dust. "Bout a hundred dollars," he said, thoughtfully. "I'll go that on the Johns' bank, just for greens," and he started up the stream toward the celestial settlement known as "the Chinese Camp."

The colonel and the veiled woman, left alone together, surveyed each other for a few moments in silence.

The old man was attempting to distinguish the woman's face beneath her thick veil, and she was contemplating him with a stern, yet sorrowful gaze.

"Can you read my thoughts as easily as you did his?" the colonel asked.

"You do not come to question concerning the future, but wish tidings of the past."

The old man started in amazement, exclaiming: "You must be a witch, indeed."

The thick veil concealed the look of scorn which came over her face.

"I am a fortune-teller," she said, her voice cold and metallic.

"Well, since you have guessed so truly concerning my errand to you, it is needless for me to question you. Go on and tell me what I wish to know."

"Twenty-five years ago your wife left you." The woman paused, as if to note the effect of her words.

An expression of pain came over the old man's face, and a half-checked sigh came from his lips. The memory of the past, even after so many years had elapsed, was painful.

When the look of pain came over his face, an expression of scornful joy shone in her dark eyes and curled the corners of her lips.

"Yes," the colonel said, after a very long pause, "go on, your knowledge is wonderful; I cannot question its truth, though I may be astounded, and at a loss to guess from whence you have obtained it."

"The fortune-telling sisterhood generally refer anxious inquirers to the stars and talk vaguely about the mystic knowledge which a seventh daughter gives unto a seventh daughter, but I say nothing. I will not fool with you in the jargon of my tribe, but merely say the knowledge is mine; you must own that it is correct, no matter what the source from whence I draw my inspiration. Now, then, question as to what you desire to know in regard to the woman who fled from you."

"Is she living?" the colonel asked, after a very long pause.

"No; she is dead."

A tone of sadness in the woman's voice touched a responsive chord in the old man's heart.

"Dead!" he repeated, and a single great tear rolled down the weather-beaten face. The memory of the only woman he had ever loved was still strong and fresh in the old soldier's heart. Forgotten now were all her faults—her fiery temper, rashness of action, her desperate flight from virtue and home; he only remembered that she had lain within his arms, that she was the mother of his child; the night of shame that had clouded her fair womanhood could not make him forget the glorious day of sunshine that had its being and its joy before the darkness came.

"Yes, she died in misery and despair." Again the cold, metallic voice—more masculine than feminine—fell discordantly upon the ears of the colonel.

"The fate that I predicted for her," he murmured, but he uttered the words in sadness, not in anger.

"The man for whom she forgot everything in the world except love cruelly deserted her—abandoned his victim to want when he tired of her caresses, as all men will tire, some time. She did not die, then, for she had ties which bound her to the world despite her wish or will. For ten years she dragged out a weary existence; the cross was heavy, and at last the weight killed her."

"And the child—my baby girl?" the colonel asked, with eager, trembling lips.

"Who would protect the child, the mother gone?" the woman asked, angrily.

"She is dead, too?" and for a moment the colonel buried his head in his hands. The woman surveyed him with a cold and haughty smile.

"I cannot understand it!" the colonel exclaimed, suddenly, raising his head. "I saw a young man to-day who was the living image of the unfortunate woman who in one mad hour wrecked two lives."

"John Rimee," said the fortune-teller, in a low, distinct voice.

The colonel started. "By Heaven, you must deal in witchcraft!"

"Am I not a fortune-teller?" she answered, scornfully. "And, after what I have told you, do you still doubt my power?"

"No, no, I do not! I do not believe that news can come from the other world, but, I own, I cannot guess the trick—the jugglery by means of which you know so much of me and mine."

"You saw in John Rimee's face a resemblance to the face of the woman whom you once called wife?" she said, evidently laboring under some strong men-

tal excitement, and paying no attention to his doubting words.

"Yes, in his face I saw every feature of hers—the same hair, the same eyes, all reproduced!"

"You questioned him, and he made reply that his mother had died in France, and that his name was John Rimee."

"You must possess more than earthly power!" the colonel exclaimed, rising in excitement.

"You felt a strange interest in this beardless boy; no wonder, if there be any truth in the saying that blood is stronger than water, for, when you looked into that face, you looked upon your own flesh and blood. John Rimee is your child!"

The colonel sunk down into the chair as though stricken by a sudden blow.

CHAPTER XVII.

A DESPERATE VENTURE.

Down through the darkness went Injun Dick.

He died a thousand deaths all in an instant; for what is more terrible than a leap in the dark? The death we can boldly front is robbed of half its terrors.

As Dick went down, in the single instant all his past life trooped rapidly before him; he lived all his life over again!

Then—splash! and Talbot was foundering in a pool of water; a moment more and his feet touched bottom.

Satisfied that for the present he was safe, as far as the outlaws were concerned, he crawled from the pool and proceeded to examine the pit into which he had fallen.

At first the terrible thought came to him that he had simply fallen into a cavity in the rock in which the water had collected, and which had but one outlet, the way he had come. If so, then he had but escaped death for a few hours only, and he must perish miserably in the trap into which he had fallen.

But he soon made a discovery that caused the blood to leap freer in his veins. He was standing in a current of *running water*. No well-hole then, hollowed in the solid rock, but a channel worn by a subterranean stream.

The chance of escape grew better and better. A volume of water which filled a channel several feet deep by six or eight in width, must require quite an opening to pass through and escape from the mountain.

But, if like the sink of Carson's river, the stream suddenly disappeared in the ground, and the solid rock barred his way? Ah! an exploration alone could determine the truth.

With the stream then, following the current, Talbot went. For a quarter of a mile at least the entire water-course wound its way through the very heart of the mountain. Every now and then the rocks would so close in that Talbot would be compelled to almost completely immerse himself in the water to crawl through, and then again, the passage would swell up in large arches like the dome of some vast cathedral.

In the darkness—more dense than any that night's dark veil could cast over the earth—the daring adventurer could only judge of the extent of the passage through which his feet were forced to pass, by the touch of his outstretched hands from side to side and the echoes of the gurgling waters resounding in the rocky gallery above.

At last he came to a halt; he could walk on no further. Around and about him on every side, except by the way by which he had come, the massive rock closed in upon him. The passage had ended!

The stream, as Talbot discovered after a careful scrutiny with his hands, escaped through a jagged passageway, evidently in the first place but a mere fissure in the rock, but widened year after year by the power of the mountain torrent.

The opening was but a little over three feet in diameter, and, being smaller than the body of the current, had forced the water back like a dam till it formed a pool. In this pool Talbot was standing.

Only one chance of escape from the terrible doom which stared him in the face remained—that of a headlong plunge through the hidden passage in the rock, trusting to the force of the current to carry him through, and to the hope that, before many feet were passed, the passage would widen out again and give him air.

It was a desperate risk, for if the passage turned abruptly in its course, or was obstructed by rocks, death by drowning would surely come.

Thrice Dick measured with his hand the rift in the rock; then, drawing in a good, long breath, he gave himself to the rapid current.

The water, forced into a channel smaller than its volume, was rushing onward like a mill-sludge. Small chance was there for thought, yet Dick realized as he was carried swiftly onward that he went either to freedom or to sudden death.

Ten seconds only was Dick Talbot beneath the surface of the stream, though it seemed to him like ten hours, when, like a great monster sporting with its prey, it vomited him forth into the daylight through the mountain's side.

Talbot gained the bank of the little pool into which the stream flowed after it gushed out from the mountain's side; then it flowed off down over the rocks and through the pines, breaking up into two streams, each one of which cuts its way in time to the Wisdom river.

Talbot, as he sat upon a rock in the clear, cold moonlight, was not an object calculated to excite envy, although he would have undoubtedly attracted much attention even from the roughly-attired citizens of the Humbug Valley.

His drenched clothes were tattered and torn, his head and hands were torn and bleeding from contact with the rocks.

"Well, this is a nice pickle," Talbot exclaimed, as he surveyed himself. He was shivering, too, for the spring was not far advanced, and the night-winds which blew over the snow-clad peaks of the rocky range were tempered with the chill of the mountain's top.

"I wonder where I am, anyway?" he queried, as he looked around him. The surroundings were not familiar. "Perhaps I have come out on the north side of the mountain? That is hardly possible, though, for the distance I have come underneath the rock was not enough to carry me to the other side of the 'divide.' These streams must flow into the Wisdom, then. By following one of them to the

river I can reach the valley, for I am not below the Bar, I am certain."

Then came a sound to Talbot's ears which raised him from the rock upon which he sat, as though the stone had suddenly become red-hot.

The noise came from the mountain-side, and from human throats. The sound of men's voices gave Talbot more alarm than if he had heard the hiss of a rattlesnake, or the screams of an angry panther crouched for his deadly spring.

He realized at once that the men from whom he had so recently escaped, the desperate road-agents, were near at hand.

To fly with noiseless speed to the cover of the nearest pines was Talbot's instant movement, then he crouched to the ground, and, hidden by the shadows, he watched.

A sense of fierce joy filled the breast of Injun Dick. A few minutes more and the secret of the entrance to the cave would be in his keeping. If fate pleased that he should escape his present peril, and once again he should stand amid the sturdy miners of Humboldt, he would lead such a force of red-shirted avengers to the haunt of the road-agents as would sweep them from the earth.

"Aha; I told you, my outlaw friend, that the game was not ended yet," Talbot muttered between his teeth. "Two hours ago it was your turn; two days more and it may be mine. I'll win that thousand dollars yet from that Bannock sharp, and I would willingly agree, even now in my present perilous position, to double the bet!"

Then from a little clump of bushes, which masked the entrance to the robbers' retreat, came three of the road-agents, and straight onward they came toward Talbot's hiding-place.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A LEGACY OF HATE.

THE words of the fortune-teller astonished the colonel. He could hardly believe the evidence of his ears.

"Is it possible?" he cried. "This man, John Rimee, cannot be a child of mine."

"He is," replied the veiled woman, decidedly.

"But he himself told me, only this morning, that he was born in France."

"A lie to deceive you."

"But why should he wish to deceive me?" questioned the colonel; "I was to him a stranger. How could he guess that I really took any serious interest as to who or what he was?"

"Hate lasts long!" the fortune-teller said, slowly.

"The wrong you did the mother lives yet in the memory of the child. John Rimee recognized you the moment his eyes fell upon your face, and yet you were the last person in the world that he expected to see. He little thought that Colonel Jacks, the Montana miner, was the United States officer who won such a brilliant record in Mexico, and on the Indian frontier. He thought that you were dead; thought not that fate destined the child to revenge the mother's wrongs."

The colonel looked at the veiled woman in utter surprise.

"I beg your pardon, madam," he said, "but you have been greatly misinformed. Twice within the last few minutes you have spoken of my wronging the woman who was once my wife. Of course I cannot guess as to the source of your information, but you have been deceived. But before I come to that, let me ask you a few questions. How can this young man, John Rimee, be my son? The child that the woman who fled from me carried with her was a baby-girl."

"I cannot explain," the woman said, impatiently, "but it is the truth. He is your son."

"And the child of my former wife?" the colonel asked, puzzled.

"Yes."

"I think that you are wrong; he is too old; we'll let that pass. Now, madam, is your knowledge of the past sufficient to tell me in what way I wronged the unfortunate woman who once bore my name?" he asked, calmly.

"Yes, you treated her cruelly, brutally, and to avoid such treatment she fled." There was a bitterness in the tone of the woman which strangely astonished the colonel.

"No, madam," he said, promptly, "you are wrong; she fled from me because I was a ruined man—because for her sake I had committed a crime which, if it had been discovered, would have cost me my commission, and drove me, a dishonored man, from the United States army. The money belonging to the men of my regiment, intrusted to my care, I squandered, foolishly, madly upon her. She knew that I was ruined—knew that each moment was likely to bring the discovery which would cover me with shame. And knowing this, she fled; fled with a man who was rich, who was able, as she thought, to minister to her reckless caprices. And then, when the day came that he was penniless too, she deserted him for another, and so she went on, until at last the dark angel cut her down in her career of guilt. This is the truth, madam."

"The angel of the past rising from the tomb defends the memory of the woman who cannot now speak in her own defense," replied the fortune-teller, just a little theatrically.

"The angel of the past lies, madam, if he or she—whichever it may be—says that I speak a single word other than the truth, when I declare, as Heaven is my witness, that that woman was the spoiled darling of my heart; that I denied her nothing, and ruined myself for her. And even now, so strong in my withered-up old heart is the old-time love that once I bore her, that my voice shakes and my eyes fill when I think of the years that are gone. And, mind you, madam, I do not forget how vile, how utterly unworthy she was of the name of woman."

"A man never does wrong in this world; it is always the woman," she replied, bitterly.

"I do not say that, madam," he exclaimed, quickly. "In this affair I do not claim that I was an angel, not even that I was a saint; but the statement that I drove that woman to a career of shame is utterly false. And now, madam, since you are so well-informed regarding the events of the past, tell what has become of my Isabel, my baby-girl, that that bad woman stole from me."

"She was her mother!" the fortune-teller said, firmly.

"And has a father no right to his child?" he asked;

"because a man is rougher in action and ruder in speech than a woman, does it follow that the holiest instincts of nature must be dead within his breast?"

"I presume not," the woman said, reluctantly.

"But can you answer the question that I have just asked you?"

"Yes."

"Ah," and an expression of joy appeared on the stern face of the old man. "Speak, I implore you; does she live?"

"Isabel, your child, is dead," the fortune-teller replied, coldly.

The colonel was staggered by the blow.

"I had no reason to hope that she was living," he moaned, "but, like a dream, I have cherished the thought that I might be permitted to see her once again before I bid good-night to this world."

"You will never see her!"

The voice of the woman was as cold and metallic as the ring of steel.

"And this young man; when I meet him I will question him," the colonel said; "I shall speedily discover whether you have spoken the truth or not. I do not, and cannot, believe that he is a son of mine, although his face is strangely like the one now resting in the quiet repose of the tomb."

The veiled woman shook her head. "You will not learn anything from him."

"And why not?" the colonel demanded.

"A promise given to the dead seals his lips."

"Given to the woman who was my wife?"

"Yes."

"I cannot understand this strange affair at all."

The old man betrayed his amazement.

"And you will never understand it," the woman rejoined, decidedly. "You would never have learned what you have, but for the strange chance of fortune which brought me here. And now, be satisfied with the knowledge you have gained. The girl, Isabel, whose soft heart might have forgiven you for your part in the past, is dead, and in her place John Rimee lives, who remembers only that his mother, with her dying breath, counseled him never to seek his father; asked him, as he loved the woman who had so carefully reared him, to even deny his existence if he should ever meet his father face to face. He will not forget that promise."

"Madam, I think that you are romancing now," the colonel said, gravely, and evidently incredulous. "I cannot believe that any human being could wish to leave such a legacy of hate behind. But, as for this young man, the next time I meet him, within five minutes I'll learn the truth. If he is my child—which I doubt—I defy him to keep the truth from me."

"We shall see," the woman replied, coldly.

"How much, madam?" the colonel asked.

"Nothing," replied the fortune-teller, half contemptuously.

"I beg your pardon, madam!" cried the old man, shortly; "I am not in the habit of taking any one's wares without paying for them. I do not imagine that you carry on the trade of fortune-telling for the fun of the thing, neither do I imagine that you live upon air. You received five dollars from Mr. Kidder, and I am quite sure that the information which you have given me is worth at the least double the amount he paid."

"Am I not at liberty to receive or refuse, as I please?" demanded the woman, impatiently.

"No, madam; in this case you are not," answered the colonel, with considerable sharpness in his tone.

"By refusing to take pay for your information you place me under an obligation, and I do not choose to remain your debtor in the least. Therefore I insist that you name the sum which I ought to pay you."

"I tell you again that I will not accept money from you!" the woman exclaimed, strangely agitated.

"And I tell you that you must and shall!" replied the colonel, promptly. Then he took a ten-dollar gold-piece from his pocket, and threw it on the table. "There, madam!" he exclaimed; "now we are quits!"

"I shall throw it into the river!" she exclaimed.

"You can do just as you please with it; that's your affair," the colonel said, urbanely. Then he opened the door and walked out.

The veiled woman was as good as her word. She seized the gold-piece, opened the window-shutter and tossed the coin into the stream beneath.

Hardly had she closed the shutter, when the Chinaman, who served as man of all work for the fortune-teller, appeared from beneath the house, where he had his bunk, and "went for" that gold-piece in the sands of the Wisdom, with a great deal of zeal.

CHAPTER XIX.

FOLLOWING THE STREAM.

FROM his covert in the rocks, overshadowed by the tall pines, Talbot watched the approach of the road-agents. He felt that he was not out of danger yet. Wet, weaponless, his fingers bleeding and sore, he was in no condition for a hand-to-hand encounter with three or four ruffians, armed to the teeth and urged on to desperate measures by the knowledge that he possessed the secret of their mountain haunts.

He could plainly see the bandits as they came on. He marked, too, the clump of bushes which concealed the entrance to the cavern, and he vowed that, if he escaped from his present peril, he would return, and, aided by the miners, adorn the tall pines, which were now swaying to and fro in the breeze of the night, with a human fruit which would be a terrible proof that Judge Lynch and the Vigilantes had been holding court near by.

There were four of the outlaw band—tall, powerful men, all bearded, too, and wearing the black half-mask which covered the entire upper part of the face.

On they walked, straight toward the fugitive. The moon, shining down clear and strong, lit up the scene as light as by day. They came on, chatting, with but little caution. It was plain that they did not dream that the hunted man was so near.

Talbot was now stretched out behind a great boulder; over him, a dense mass of raspberry bushes lent their shade; their tops touched the boulder and half concealed the form of the man crouched beneath. By Talbot's head, a second boulder touched the first, and through the crevice that lay be-

tween, the fugitive could watch the advance of the outlaws.

Nearer and nearer they came, and, at last, halted for consultation within a yard of Talbot's hiding-place, when one of the worthies produced a whisky flask and invited the others to join him in a drink.

Tantalus, the Greek, perishing of thirst, and with the water bubbling near to his lips, yet never touching them, suffered but little more than Talbot, as he lay in the cold shadow of the boulders, wet to the skin, and listened to the gurgling whisky as it went down the thirsty throats of the outlaws.

Had there been but two, the chances are that Injun Dick would have boldly risen from his ambush and done battle with them for the invigorating cordial, though they were fully armed and he was weaponless.

But the odds were too great; so Talbot was forced to remain passive.

Then the outlaws indulged in a short conversation, and listening intently, Dick discovered that the four were a patrol sent out by Rocky Mountain Rob to scour the canyons and gulches leading down toward the Humboldt Valley in search of him.

It soon became evident that his mysterious escape had sorely puzzled the road-agents, and that they were utterly at a loss to guess by what means he had succeeded in eluding them.

Then, after a delay of ten minutes or more, which seemed like so many hours to the fugitive, the outlaws departed, going southward and following the course of one of the brooks which flowed from the pool into which, like a second Jonah, Talbot had been cast out of the stomach of the mountain.

Talbot did not move. He waited to assure himself that they had indeed gone on and that there was no prospect of their return; and thus for full ten minutes he remained quiet.

All was still; no sound, except the breezes of the night sighing through the bushy tops of the tall pines. Then a squirrel came out on the top of a boulder, sat up on his haunches and looked around him; an early riser descending from his home in the tall pine tree to drink in the fresh dews of the morning.

The appearance of the squirrel and a glance at the eastern sky convinced Talbot that the night was on the wane, and that the morning would soon come.

The lines of light in the east grew stronger and stronger, the moon's rays lost their power, and Talbot saw that the dawn of day was near. He moved restlessly, preparing to rise. Up into the pine, like an electric flash, went the squirrel; he circled round and round the tall trunk, until at last he found refuge in the bushy top, and from amid the green, peered down curiously at the mortal who, so woe-begone, dragged himself up from the surface of the cold ground and rested his weary limbs upon the boulder.

Talbot was chilled to the bone; his teeth chattered and he felt as if the numbness of years had come suddenly upon him. With determined resolution he essayed to shake off the dangerous feeling. From among the rocks he picked up a short and knotted branch of the scrubby mountain oak, which some violent gust of wind had torn from the parent tree. The wood had been hardened by exposure until it was like iron. No contemptible weapon in the hands of an active and desperate man. Not that Injun Dick felt at all active, for each limb was as stiff as if he had lain for a night in an ague-swamp.

"The sun will be up in two hours, and then I'll get rid of this cursed numbness!" cried Dick, shivering. Then, grasping his stick, he made his way cautiously over the rocks.

As the four road-agents had followed the course of one of the brooks, Talbot decided to pursue the other, trusting that it would be impossible for the outlaws to guard all the passages leading into the valley. He called into play his utmost caution, for he had gathered from their conversation that the brigands had been instructed to place themselves in ambush and intercept him leaving the valley. He scanned each clump of bushes, each knot of pines, and each huge boulder before him. He skulked forward as the red Indian steals in upon his prey. A hunter stalking the keen-scented deer could not have proceeded with more silence.

Like the red warrior he noted the gambols of the wild denizens of the rocky range. When he saw the squirrel running fearless from boulder to boulder, and the jackass-rabbit with his long ears, not pinched up in alarm, but carelessly laid back upon his shoulders, moving in short skips over the rocky reach, he knew that the outlaws lay not in ambush beyond.

But when, peering forth from the covert of a nest of raspberry bushes, over the top of some huge rock, as regular in its outline as though carved by the chisel and the mallet of the stone-cutter, or from behind the stout trunk of some straight, tall pine, he saw neither squirrel nor rabbit—no sign of animal life—he carefully examined the open space, and ventured not to cross it, until he was convinced that the man-hunters lurked not in ambush in the coverts beyond.

An hour had passed since Talbot had commenced his difficult task, and he had not yet made his way from the mountain gulch. The sun's broad beam had just begun to gild the mountain tops, which shone like solid masses of silver from the snow and ice still lingering upon their summits. Climbing over the rocks had wrought a great difference in the stiffened limbs of the fugitive. The numbness had almost entirely disappeared, and he once more felt as if he was able to give battle for his life.

At last he came to a gloomy canyon, through which ran the little stream which he was following. On either side the rock rose regular as though it was a cemented wall laid by human hands, rather than the work of some terrible convulsion of nature in far-off ages.

Once through the canyon, Talbot doubted not that his eyes would look upon the Humboldt Valley.

CHAPTER XX.

THE MYSTERIOUS VOICE.

THE canyon was but a narrow passage in the rock, barely thirty feet in width from wall to wall, and the mountain streams, spreading out in shallow pools connected by little rivulets, filled the entire space.

Talbot saw at once that the only method of getting through this rift was to wade through the pools and down the stream. He understood now why the

outlaws had chosen to follow the course of the other streamlet. That, like the brook that Talbot was on, evidently found its way through the wall of rock by means of a canyon similar to the one through which Dick had decided to pass, only he guessed that the other canyon was wide enough to afford a passage-way over the rocks by the side of the stream.

Into the gloomy gorge, then, Talbot went without hesitation. The walls, rising straight upward two hundred feet or more, encompassed him. No sign of life was there within that gloomy spot except that, as he waded through the still pools, or jumped from boulder to boulder, in the middle of the purling stream, the speckled trout, swift as the arrow from the bow, would dart from under the sheltering rock and flash across the brook.

Twenty minutes or so had Dick toiled onward through the dark canyon, when it turned slightly to the right, and a hundred yards beyond ended.

Now came the danger. Talbot guessed at once that by the opening of the canyon the road-agents would lie in wait.

Once again he stole onward with noiseless steps; the knotted club he grasped with a firmer hand, and nerved each muscle in his frame for a desperate conflict. He expected that any moment might bring him, unawares, upon his enemy.

A dozen steps more and he would be clear of the canyon. The moment of danger was near at hand. Noiselessly, Talbot advanced; ten steps and he stood at the canyon's mouth. Beyond him lay the upper valley of the Wisdom, and afar off, on the clear blue sky, he could see the curls of smoke which rose from the "city" of Humberg Bar.

But there was something else which forced itself upon Talbot's vision, besides the blue sky, the rising valley and the smoke rings. Scarcely fifty paces from the mouth of the canyon, seated upon the ground, indulging in a game of cards, were three of the road-agents, while the fourth, a cocked revolver in the hollow of his hand, was leaning over a giant boulder, and keeping watch and ward to the north.

The backs of the outlaws—except one of the three engaged in the game of cards—were turned toward Talbot. The watch was directed to the north, not to the canyon through which Dick had come. A moment's examination showed Dick the cause. A hundred yards or so to the north was the entrance to another canyon, through which, as Talbot had anticipated, the other branch of the underground stream found its way into the valley, and then into the Wisdom.

The outlaws had apparently no idea that their prey would come by any other path than by the one which they watched.

Oh, how Talbot cursed the unlucky chance that robbed him of his weapons. If he had had his trusty six-shooter with him, he could easily have "picked" off two of the three engaged in the game of cards, if not all three of them, before they could have risen to their feet. But, weaponless as he was, he could only crouch down behind one of the rocks at the entrance of the canyon and wait, trusting that in time the outlaws would tire of their watch and return to their hidden abode in the mountain's side.

The card-game proceeded with increased earnestness; the sentinel on watch turned every now and then to note the progress of the play; it was plain that he wished to join in with the others.

The outlaws were playing "poker," gambling with bits of stone for money as seriously as though ounces of gold-dust depended upon the turn of the card.

Talbot had plenty of time to examine how the land lay. About five hundred paces from the rocky range was a trail leading along parallel with the valley, evidently an old Indian road, made by war-parties crossing the rocky range from the Salmon River Valley, the country of the Flatheads, to the hunting-grounds of the Blackfeet and the Crows, in the valleys washed by the Wisdom river and the Jefferson Fork of the great Missouri, into which the water of the Wisdom flowed.

Then, suddenly, came a sound on the clear mountain air which made the outlaw band drop their cards, grasp their weapons, and spring to their feet. The sound also brought hope to the heart of the fugitive crouching down behind the boulders.

Sharp on the mountain air came the clear ring of a horse's hoof, shod with iron, striking upon the rocks over which ran the old Blackfoot trail. No Indian pony, then, bearing a red-skin, but a white-man's charger.

A moment or so the road-agents paused and listened; then they held a muttered consultation, and afterward, like so many snakes, crouched down behind the rocks and bushes, evidently lying in ambush for the horseman.

Sharper and sharper the sound of the horse's hoofs rung out upon the air as the stranger came gradually on.

From his hiding-place, Talbot could plainly see the outlaws examining their weapons and preparing to attack the new-comer.

He fully comprehended the danger to which the horseman was exposed. Advancing helplessly, not dreaming of peril, he would fall an easy prey to the human wolves crouched behind the rocks.

The path the horseman was following so wound in and about the rocks and clumps of trees, which fringed the mountain's side, that, though the sound of the horse's hoofs could be plainly heard, yet the rider was still concealed from sight, nor would he come into view until he reached the little open space through which flowed the two branches of the mountain stream.

The horseman then was safe from danger until he reached the open space, but Talbot fully understood that the moment the horseman should appear in the opening the revolvers of the outlaws would speak, and the death-cry of the victim would follow as surely as the white smoke of the powder would curl upward on the clear mountain air.

And Talbot, too, did not dare to venture from his hiding-place to warn the stranger of the terrible danger which lurked in his path, for he, too, was within easy range of the outlaws' fire.

Louder and louder grew the sound of the horse's hoofs; a few seconds more and the stranger would be in the trap.

Talbot's heart beat high, and his breath came thick and fast. Could he save the stranger from the outlaws, the horseman in turn might save him from them. A thought flashed across his brain.

He could not show himself to warn the stranger, for that would expose him to the fire of the road-agents, nor could he see the stranger until he appeared at the edge of the opening, and then it would be too late; but, by a single shout he could put the horseman on his guard, and yet not betray his own hiding-place; that is, if the stranger was at all used to the wild life of the mountain region and was prepared to meet danger at every turn.

The stranger was within ten feet of the opening when Talbot's warning cry rung out shrilly on the air.

"Stop! Danger!"

Then came a sudden change upon the scene.

The horseman pulled his steed up short; the outlaws grasped their weapons and glared around them in perfect amazement, while Dick, snugly concealed behind the boulders, laughed at the success of his plan.

The road-agents were thoroughly astonished, and just a little bit alarmed. They had not dreamed that mortal soul was near save themselves and the horseman whom they had marked for their prey.

And now the clear voice ringing out on the air seemed to them more like the warning of a being from the other world than the caution of a mortal like themselves.

The rock echo, too, took up the shout, and "Stop! danger!" came back clear and full from the mountain-side.

The echo's voice completely unnerved the superstitious outlaws.

One, bolder than the rest, cried out in a whisper that the warning sounds came from wandering miners prospecting for gold on the hill above them; but another declared, in fear-stricken tones, that the spirits of the air had leagued together to save the stranger from them.

And Dick, lying behind the rocks, chuckled as he beheld their alarm; but, the end had not yet come; the outlaws still held their ground, though now they watched the mountain's side on their flank as carefully as they did the open space before them. It was plain that they expected an attack from a hidden foe.

And the stranger who had been stopped so unceremoniously? No sound came from the rocky trail to denote his whereabouts or probable action.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FIGHT.

For full twenty minutes there was silence on the mountain's sides. The four road-agents still crouched behind the rocks, with their cocked revolvers in their hands; Talbot still remained concealed behind a rock at the mouth of the smaller canyon, chafing with impatience; and the mounted stranger, who had stopped so quietly at Talbot's warning cry, gave no sign to denote his presence.

The action of the drama had stopped. The brooks flowed swiftly on; the sun rose higher and higher, and to the stranger, passing along the old Indian trail, there was nothing to denote that each moment might see the beginning of a fearful tragedy.

"What the blazes has become of him?" growled the taller one of the four brigands—a huge ruffian. He referred to the horseman who had stopped so suddenly.

"Gone back," suggested one of the outlaws.

"Not a bit of it!" cried the smallest one of the four—a red-bearded fellow, short and stoutly built, like a Pawnee Indian.

"Why not?"

"We'd have heered his hoss's hoofs ef he had."

"I wonder whar that yell came from, anyway?" said another one of the three, with a covert glance at the rocky ledge above him, as if he expected to see a human form perched on the almost inaccessible crag.

"Oh, you needn't to look thar," the huge outlaw said, sneeringly; "ef thar was anybody up thar, an' they wanted to go fur us, they could 'a' smashed blue blazes outen us with a rock, long ago."

"What's your programme?" asked the fourth one of the band.

"Why, I take it that this feller is a-hidin' in the bushes over yon, an' I move that one or two of us scout 'round an' git in his rear; then we've got him."

"But this feller wot gave the yell?"

"We kin take keer of him arter we finish the feller that was on the hoss."

"Who'll go on the scout?"

"I will, for one," the red-bearded man said.

"And I for another," said the giant.

"And we'll be ready in case you start him," one of the others said, slapping the butt of his revolver significantly.

"All co-rect; an' now I'll jest take a look fur to see how the old thing works," the ruffian with the red beard said, facetiously.

The four looked at each other and grinned—they appreciated humor—and then "Red-beard" raised his head cautiously and peered out between the rocks.

Crack!

The sharp report of a Spencer rifle sounded on the air; the ball struck the imprudent outlaw, who had exposed himself to the gaze of the foe, plumb between the eyes, boring a little round hole through the black mask and the skull-bone into his brains.

The road-agent dropped to the ground, stone dead, his lips still parted by the smile, showing his yellow, fang-like teeth.

The outlaws glared at each other in horror. They could hardly realize that death had come so suddenly among them.

A moment, with eyes distended by horror, they looked upon the body of their stricken comrade lying, yet warm, before them; then their muttered curses rose on the air, and they sought to discover from whence the shot had come that had been fired with such fatal aim.

It was with extreme caution, though, that the outlaws peered from behind the rocks.

On the other side of the opening, just where the Indian trail debouched into the open space, a curl of white smoke was rising slowly from a little clump of bushes.

"Thar; the cuss is hid in them bushes!" the giant cried, angrily. "Now, boys, put a volley right into the bush; it's ten to one that we 'wing' him!"

Then, with deliberate aim, the three outlaws pour-

ed six shots into the clump of bushes from which rose the white smoke.

A hollow groan broke on the air, coming from the other side of the opening.

"We've hit him, by Cain!" cried the giant, in glee, and, incautiously, he exposed his head, expecting to see some signs of a death-struggle going on amid the bushes into which they had fired.

Crack!

Again the rifle spoke; again a stricken man went down; shot through the brain, dying instantly and almost without a groan. The giant would never more figure in scenes of carnage and plunder.

For a moment the two remaining ruffians gazed in ghastly astonishment upon the lifeless form before them, then looked forth toward the covert of the hidden foe, who, single-handed, was making such a terrible fight.

Another curl of white smoke was rising slowly on the air, but this time it came from the other side of the Indian trail.

The outlaws guessed the truth in an instant; they had been tricked. After firing the first shot the stranger had changed his position, and their volley had damaged only the bushes and the rocks. The hollow moan of pain was simply a device to induce them to relax their caution. It had succeeded only too well; bitterly the brigands cursed their own stupidity and the shrewdness of their unknown foe.

"What had we better do?" questioned one of the outlaws, looking, with a troubled face, at the bloody evidence of the stranger's skill in marksmanship lying stiff and still before him.

"Git!" replied the other, laconically.

"Without trying to git even for this work?" the other asked, pointing to his slain comrades.

"Are you tired of the game, an' want to 'pass in your check'?"

"Well, no, but I hate like blazes to cry quits jist yet. Four on us ag'in' one, an' git flaxed, too; it won't do to tell Rob o' that. He'd drive us out o' the band in no time."

"I don't keer what anybody says," the calculating ruffian said, doggedly. "I ain't a fool; I know when I've got enough; thar ain't the least bit of a hog 'bout me. This stranger's 'hand' is too much for me; I 'pass' this time for sure."

"I'm going to have another crack at him, anyway!" the first outlaw cried; "you kin jest git ef you want to."

"Well, I'll stay long enough for to see this cuss plug you, too, then I'll 'levant!'" the second replied, coolly.

"He don't plug me much, you bet!" the other cried, in anger. "I'll flax him yet!" And then he shook his clenched fist savagely at the invisible foe on the other side of the little open space.

The empty menace came near costing the outlaw dear, for, incautiously, he exposed his hand beyond the cover of the boulder, and the alert foe, ever on the watch, promptly sent a bullet at it, which was fired with such excellent aim that it tore away a piece of skin from one of the outlaw's knuckles.

A storm of curses came from the lips of the road-agent as his hand dropped down, benumbed by the bullet's shock. The ruffian at first thought that his hand was shattered.

"Oh! you're anxious to be laid out, you are!" the other outlaw exclaimed, out of patience at the bravado of his comrade.

And just about this stage of the game, Dick thought that he might as well take a hand in. From his post of observation he had seen the two outlaws fall by the bullets of the ambushed foe, and noticed, also, the wounding of the third outlaw. And now, from the uneasy movements of the two road-agents, he confidently guessed that they were preparing to retreat from all further contest.

CHAPTER XXII.

FACE TO FACE.

AND while the second outlaw was urging the first to retreat, and he, ruefully regarding his bleeding hand, was calling down curses upon the head of the ambushed marksman, Talbot's voice rung out clear upon the air:

"There's only two left, and one of them's wounded, so steady; Jim and Bill take 'em in the flank, and keep 'em in to the mountain; up and at 'em!" and then Talbot yelled like a demon.

"Blazes! there's an army of them!" cried one of the outlaws, and then the two dashed backward over the rocks and through the bushes, going up the canyon like hunted antelopes.

The stranger in the bushes sent half a dozen shots after them with his repeating rifle as fast as he could fire. He understood the stratagem.

The road-agents, running for their lives up the canyon, were completely convinced that, in place of one man, they had really been contending with a dozen.

The noise made by the outlaws crashing through the bush had hardly died away when Talbot stepped forth from his place of concealment in the mouth of the smaller canyon. He was curious to see the man who had given the desperate outlaws such a terrible lesson.

Dick had hardly gained the center of the opening, when, from the bushes by the Indian trail, came a young man, leading a coal-black horse of wondrous beauty. In his hand he carried the rifle which had done such deadly execution on the persons of the outlaws.

Talbot and the stranger met in the center of the open space, and there was a mutual start of surprise. Each recognized the other.

The horseman was the man who, at the Water-proof saloon, in answer to Colonel Jacks, had stated that his name was John Rimee.

Hardly had the young man caught sight of Talbot's face, when he dropped the reins of the horse which he was leading, cocked the Spencer, and brought it half up on a line with Dick's breast.

Talbot, ten paces from the stranger, stirred not at the menacing motion, and moved neither hand nor foot to stay the threatened attack. He only surveyed the stranger in wonder, and, holding in his hand the knotted stick, he leaned calmly upon it.

A moment in silence the stranger covered Talbot with the muzzle of his rifle; there was a nervous tremor in his hand, a finger of which was pressed upon the trigger, but the pressure which would have sent the rifle-ball to Dick's heart was wanting.

"You are Dick Talbot," the stranger said, slowly, and there was a strange nervousness in his manner.

"Yes, I am Dick Talbot," the threatened man replied, as cool and unconcerned as if he had not spent the entire night in perilous adventures, and now, at the very moment of apparent rescue, had not encountered another danger as terribly as any of those through which he had just passed.

"You do not deny your name?"

"No; why should I?"

"And yet there is danger in owning that you are Dick Talbot."

"I can't help it," Dick replied, coolly; "it would be of little use to deny my identity to you, and if my time has come, I might as well die with the truth on my lips as with a lie there."

Doubt and irresolution were plainly written on the stranger's face. It was evident that a struggle was going on in his breast.

"Do you remember me?" he asked, after quite a long pause.

"Oh, yes," Talbot replied, with perfect unconcern; "I met you about a year ago at Barrel Camp, on the Salmon river. Some hasty gentlemen were about to string me up without judge or jury, when you interfered and saved my life."

"Do you remember what I said to you then?"

"Perfectly; you told me that you bore me a deadly hatred; that you were hunting me down for the express purpose of killing me."

"I saved your life then," the stranger said, slowly.

"Yes; but as you were kind enough to inform me, you saved me that you might have the pleasure of killing me yourself."

"You remember that I gave you one year to live?"

"Yes; but I have exceeded that time by a month at least."

"Thank accident for that," Rimee said, quickly. "I tracked you to Bannock city; but for your abrupt departure for the mountains, you would not have outlived the year more than a week."

"But now, my young friend, you've got me foul, haven't you?" and Dick really smiled in face of his foe.

Rimee's brow grew dark, and his eyes flashed as he noticed the smile upon Talbot's face. The hands which held the rifle trembled; the smile invited him, and yet he did not fire.

"It does not seem to trouble you much," Rimee said, with bitter accent.

"Why should it?" Dick asked, contemptuously.

"Is not life valuable to you?"

"What have I to live for?" Talbot questioned in return.

Rimee shook his head.

"How should I know? I can only say that life has charms to every man, no matter what may be his lot in life."

"That is not always true," Talbot said, slowly and sadly. "Some men live too long; they outlive all that makes life happy, and then death is a blessing, not a curse."

"Are you such a man?"

"No; I am nothing," Talbot replied, carelessly.

"I am so old a gambler—have played so often with my life, as with my gold-dust, that I think as little of losing the one as I do the other. When my time comes I am ready to go."

"No ties, then, to bind you to the world?"

"Not a solitary tie."

"No woman that you love, and who will mourn for you?"

"No; two women in my life have loved me. One I got, the other I did not care for. The first is dead, the second, in the East, has learned to love another man who will make her a far happier woman than I could ever have done."

"One love only in your life?"

"One true love only," Talbot answered, smiling.

"I have liked other women for a time, and then forgotten them, as they have forgotten me."

"You are right," Rimee said, slowly and with a sigh; "women are very worthless creatures."

Talbot's keen eyes were fixed intently on the face of the young man; what he read there brought first a look of astonishment, and then a shrewd smile.

"You are yet but a boy in years—too young to make such a sweeping assertion. Why, the down of your mustache is just appearing on your lip."

A shade of annoyance passed rapidly over the face of the young man. It was evident that something in Talbot's speech had offended him.

"I think I have guessed why you seek my life," Talbot continued, slowly, his keen eyes still fixed upon the expressive face before him, and reading in that face the thoughts passing in the young man's mind as plainly as though they had been translated into words.

"Well?"

"I have taken away some fair maiden that you coveted."

The look of utter disgust which flashed rapidly across the face of the young man was proof positive to Talbot that his guess was right.

"Never mind the reason; suffice it that I have sworn to kill you," Rimee said, hastily.

"Why on earth don't you do it, then?" asked Dick, impatiently. "Here for a good ten minutes you've kept your rifle leveled at my breast, playing with me as the cat plays with the mouse. You can't possibly miss me at this distance, for you can handle the rifle equal to a squirrel-hunter, as the dead men yonder can testify, could they speak."

"Did you give the warning which stopped me on the edge of this place?" Rimee asked, suddenly.

Talbot simply nodded.

"You saved me from death, then, for I dreamed not that danger was near, and should have fallen an easy prey."

"Yes, that's true; a single foot beyond the cover and you would have been a dead man. What a pity I stopped you!" Talbot said, reflectively. "If I had only known who it was, I could have let you come on; the outlaws would have picked you off, and I should have had one foe the less."

"And you would have let me go blindly to my death?"

"Of course!" and Dick looked smilingly into the face of the other.

"I do not believe it!" Rimee cried, and he dropped the butt of the rifle to the ground. "You have saved my life, and I'll not raise a finger against you."

"You will not seek my life, then?"

"At the present, no; in the future, yes. So be on

your guard. I saved your life in Barrel Camp; you have returned the favor to-day, and now we are even. Arm yourself, for the next time we meet, one of us must die!"

Then Rimee swung himself into the saddle and galloped off, taking the road back to the valley.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"GOING" FOR THE PRIZE.

TALBOT looked after the young stranger, a quiet smile upon his face.

"What in the world have I done to this young man or to friends of his, that he should hate me so bitterly?" he asked, as he listened to the rapidly-receding sound of the horse's hoofs striking upon the rocky trail.

Talbot had asked a question which he could not answer.

And then it suddenly occurred to him that the horseman, instead of proceeding on his journey, had actually turned squarely around and retraced his way back to the valley.

"Hang me if I can understand it at all," he muttered.

By this time the sun was high in the heavens, and its warm beams were particularly agreeable to Talbot, whose heavy woolen garments were yet wet from his passage through the water.

Then Talbot turned his attention to the dead outlaws.

"To the victor belong the spoils," he cried. "It is an old adage," and then Dick quietly possessed himself of their revolvers, and from the belt of the giant took the keen-edged bowie-knife.

"Remingtons, and in capital order, too," Talbot murmured, as he examined the revolvers. Then from the outlaws' pockets he supplied himself with cartridges.

Removing the masks from their faces, he examined their features. Both were strangers to him.

"The vultures will make short work of them," Talbot muttered, as he turned away. "I had better be making tracks; the comrades of these handsome gentlemen may take it into their heads to return with reinforcements, and I think that I've had about all the excitement that my health demands for the present."

Then Talbot left the open space, entered upon the Indian trail, and traversed it with rapid steps.

At the expiration of half an hour, he entered upon the Humbug Valley. A mile or so beyond lay the Bar.

As Talbot came into the town, he saw the shanty of the fortune-teller. The thought of her prediction came instantly to his mind.

"It was a narrow squeeze," he said, with a laugh, "but the road-agents couldn't keep me, and I have an idea, too, that this young stranger won't get another chance at me in a hurry. After the warning I have received, I should be fully justified in 'hunting' this stranger and ending the struggle at a single blow. I would do so, perhaps, in any other case but this, but the suspicion that haunts me must either be verified or disproved before I take action. I must take an early opportunity to call upon this fair oracle of fortune again. I have an idea that she can give me some valuable information, and without knowing it, too," and Dick laughed merrily as he proceeded onward.

As he came round the corner of the road into the main street of the Bar, he discovered the Indian, Mud Turtle, seated upon a bowlder by the roadside, smoking a short pipe.

"Me glad," said the Indian, as Dick approached. Then the chief surveyed Dick curiously. "Heap fight, wildcat?" he asked, noticing the scratches upon Talbot's hands and the rents in his coat.

"No; the road-agents."

The Indian then arose, and Talbot related his adventures during the night. The chief listened attentively, and his keen black eyes sparkled when he learned the secret of the outlaws' retreat in the mountains.

"Make heap dollars, maybe—some time—bimeby," he said, briefly.

"But what were you doing here on this stone?" Dick asked.

"No find white brother, big Injun sit down—wait for white brother to come back. Chief want white brother now."

"What do you want me for?"

"Big chief got squaw now."

"Squaw!" ejaculated Talbot, in astonishment. "I was not aware there were any Indians in the valley."

"No Injun!" said the chief, loftily. "O-wa-he, Blackfoot chief, no want Injun squaw—got two now—played out—give 'em to white brother—s'pose he take 'em quick. Chief got white squaw now."

"A white squaw!" exclaimed Talbot, in amazement, for he was well aware that white women were few and far between in the Wisdom valley.

"Yes, nice white squaw—good 'nuff to eat," said the chief, evidently impressed with the value of the prize he had captured.

"Who is she?"

"Daughter white chief, barefooted-on-top-of-head—keeps hash-house, you bet," replied the Indian, with stolid dignity.

"What, Bessie Shook!" cried Talbot, in astonishment.

"Chief win her—play poker with old white father, get dead wood on him. Mud Turtle no fool Injun—play poker, heap," and the chief looked sagacious.

"Well, how does the young lady like it?" Dick inquired, not able to comprehend the truth, and believing that the Indian had made some strange mistake.

"Chief no see white squaw yet—he wait for white brother to come back. S'pose white brother go with Injun, he take squaw now—right away—putty soon," the Blackfoot said, drawing his blanket tighter around him, preparatory to setting out.

Talbot couldn't understand it in the least; the savage was so positive in his assertion that he was fairly staggered.

"Well—s'pose go now?" the Indian said, impatiently.

"All right; go ahead," Dick said.

Talbot thought that it was best to let the Indian have his own way, knowing that as soon as they reached the saloon the explanation would come.

The two proceeded at once straight to the Waterproof saloon.

As Talbot and the Indian approached the place, they were perceived, and quite a little crowd gathered in the doorway.

The joke had been too rich for Bob Shook and Johnny Bird to keep, and all Humbug Bar had roared over the recital of how old Pop Shook had played poker with the Indian, Mud Turtle. And, as a natural consequence, every visitor to the saloon, after the story got about, made it a point to ask old Pop if he'd played any poker lately, and how much four kings and an ace were worth at the bottom of the pack.

And the result had been that the old man had sworn worse than a mule-teamster, and threatened to shoot on sight the next man who dared to say poker to him.

Great, therefore, was the excitement when a stalwart miner rushed into the saloon and yelled out:

"Pop, hyer's the Injun comin' for the gall!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

CORNERING SHOOK.

OLD SHOOK looked anything but pleased when he saw the Indian and Talbot approaching. Of course he guessed at once that the savage had come to claim the prize that he had fairly won, and how to get out of the scrape Shook knew not.

The inmates of the saloon were hugely pleased as they beheld old Shook's troubled face; they anticipated a rich scene.

The Indian and Talbot entered the door. A sudden silence came over the noisy crowd as the warrior strode across the floor and faced the old man behind the bar.

"How?" said the Indian, laconically.

Old Shook took no notice whatever of the chief, but pretended to be very busy wiping a tumbler.

"Glad to see white father—white father glad to see Injun?"

"Yes, of course," the old man answered, slowly, never raising his eyes to the Indian's face, rubbing the glass very industriously.

"It is good," said the chief, gravely. "Injun come for squaw now."

And then there was an awful silence; the bearded men, who had been joking among themselves, stopped, and all leaned forward, anxious to hear the old man's reply.

Shook rubbed away at the glass and got as red in the face as a boiled lobster.

"White father no hear Injun," the red-skin observed, sarcastically. "S'pose chief talk heap louder, maybe white father hear. Chief come for squaw—now."

And as the Indian spoke, there was a glitter in his dark eyes, which plainly told that he did not consider the matter a joke.

"Well, chief, I swow, you've got me," said the old man, with forced good humor, leaning his arms on the narrow bar, and, for the first time, looking the Indian in the face.

"How got white father? Chief no see." The Indian spoke calmly enough, but there was an ugly look on his dark face.

"Well, I thought the hull thing was a joke, you see," Shook explained.

"White father lie!" cried the Indian, scornfully; "he want cheat Injun out of squaw!"

Old Shook's face grew purple, but, with a great effort, he restrained himself.

"See hyer, Indian, that's no way to talk," he said. "We white men don't sell our gals, or stake 'em like mules on a game of keards. We don't do business that way."

"White father say he play poker for squaw; s'pose he beat Injun, he no take Mud Turtle's gold-dust?"

"No, of course not! All in fun, you know," Shook explained.

But, before the words were fairly out of his mouth, there was a roar of laughter in the room, which made the worthy host of the Waterproof turn scarlet with rage again.

"Oh, that's too thin, old man!" said Johnny Bird.

"Oh, he wouldn't have taken the dust!" cried another.

"Of course not!" ejaculated a third.

"Now, shet up, boys!" cried Shook, appealingly; "this air is a serious business now."

"White father think Injun cheat 'um, chief play poker ag'in; flax white father, you bet!" said the Indian, with dignity.

"That's fair!"

"Squar' as you make 'um!"

"Go fur him, Pop!"

The miners were enjoying the fun.

"Now, boys, this is a leetle too much!" cried the old man, in remonstrance.

"Injun waiting," said the chief, loftily.

"I can't give the gal to you, chief; she won't be gave!" cried the old man.

"S'pose you call squaw," the Indian suggested.

The old man thought that this was a good idea; he saw a chance of getting out of the scrape.

"Tell Bessie to come hyer, Bob," he said; and then, as Bob left the room, Shook put a bottle and glass on the bar, and pushed them toward the Indian.

"Take somethin'," he said, blandly.

The Indian shook his head with stolid dignity. It was evident that he wanted nothing but his bond.

"Oh, that's played, old man," said Johnny Bird, with mock earnestness, "you can't fool the chief."

"You can't git 'round him now!" exclaimed another one of the crowd.

"Now, boys, let up!" Shook cried, appealingly; "this is a rough joke on me, anyway."

Bessie's appearance gave a new interest to the scene.

"See hyer, Bess, we want you to decide—"

"I know all about it father," the girl said, interrupting him. "Bob told me all about it."

A single look of Bob's demure face ought to have told old Shook that mischief was brewing, but he didn't have the slightest suspicion.

"That's all co-rect an' we kin settle the hull thing in two shakes of a lamb's tail," the old man said, complacently.

"You played poker with the chief, and put me up as a stake?" Bessie said.

"Yes."

"And the Indian won fairly?"

"Well, yes, I s'pose he did," Shook said, ruefully,

and the bystanders roared at the expression upon the old man's face.

"If he won, that settles the matter, of course, and I must go with him."

If a thunderbolt had crashed in the roof of the Waterproof saloon at that moment, it could not have astonished the old man more than the girl's announcement.

"What?" yelled the old man, in a rage.

The Indian looked delighted, while the miners gave themselves up to unrestrained merriment.

"Oh, you infernal scoundrel!" roared Shook, shaking his fist at the redoubtable Bob, who was red in the face trying to suppress his laughter; "you've done this?"

And then the crowd roared again.

The Indian was a little astonished at the uproarious mirth. The case had been decided in his favor, and he could see no cause for the unseemly merriment.

"When squaw ready, chief ready, too," he said.

It was evident to all that the chief was in sober earnest. He did not take it as a joke at all.

Bessie looked puzzled for a moment. She did not wish to offend the chief if she could help it; then she thought of a way out of the dilemma.

"Am I to go with you, chief?" she asked.

The Indian gravely nodded assent.

"But where?"

"Home of Blackfoot chief—Muscle-shell river," he replied.

"Oh, but I can't go there, chief," she said, with a winning smile. "I can not go to the wilderness. I must have a nice house like this to live in."

A grave look came over the face of the Indian. He began to see that he was not going to get the squaw after all.

"Chief's lodge is big—buffalo-skins; no house to give white squaw," he said, slowly.

"And, chief, if I marry you, you must become a Christian."

This settled the Indian's doubting mind.

"Be Christian?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Like white father?" and he pointed to Shook.

"Yes."

"Ugh! Injun be Christian like white father; next time he play poker, he say, mountain all mine, stake 'em. He lose, he no give mountain. He say, go take him away. Mountain no go, he no pay. When Injun lose, Injun pay. He no be Christian—he honest man—no cheat."

Gravely the Indian delivered his sweeping accusation.

"The Injun's right," the miners muttered among themselves.

"Say, old man, I kin fix the thing up," Johnny Bird cried, rising. "S'pose you pay the Injun so many ounces of gold-dust for to call the thing squaw?"

"Injun no get squaw, he take dust," said the chief, willing to compromise the matter.

"And the white squaw will be the chief's sister," said Bessie, withdrawing from the room.

And so the famous poker case was settled. After a great deal of haggling, the number of ounces was agreed upon, and old Shook paid them over to the Indian.

But a sigh came from the man as he weighed out the dust.

"I tell you what it is, boys," he said, gravely, "it don't do to bet on a sure thing in this world now, for sure things air sometimes mighty onsartin."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CHINESE CAMP.

THE Chinese Camp was situated up the Wisdom river, some three miles from Humbug Bar.

The Camp had originally been known as "Murphy's Strike," and at one time bid fair to be the richest "lead" struck in Montana for years. But, to the astonishment of Murphy and his partners—about a dozen were with Murphy—the "pay-dirt" suddenly "petered" out, and in a short time the mine ceased to pay its running expenses.

Then Mr. Murphy and his crowd "got up and dusted," to describe the operation they performed in mining parlance, and the mine was left to take care of itself; until, at last, a crowd of almond-eyed celestials took possession of the deserted camp, and, as is usually the case, succeeded in extracting sufficient gold from the ore to pay them for working the mine.

Thirty days after they had taken possession, "Murphy's Strike" was among the things of the past, and the "Chinese Camp" took its place.

Naturally, the fact that the "heathen Chinese" had succeeded in making a mine pay that the pure-blooded native Americans (from the cove of Cork) had "slipped up on"—mining parlance again—was not altogether agreeable to the neighboring miners as a general thing, and more than one rough-bearded, red-shirted fellow, elegantly perfumed (whisky and plug tobacco commingled) had suggested that "the durned heathens ought to be cleaned out," but the better portion of the community had frowned down the idea.

But, the moment the fact that the Celestials had started a bank at the Chinese Camp was generally known, the way the hard miners, the moment the day's toil was done, started for that bank was a caution.

One and all declared that it was a disgrace to the valley for the heathens to run a bank, and they'd bu'st it or perish in the attempt.

It was the old legend that the emigrant painted upon his wagon-cover, "Pike's Peak or bu'st!" and like that unfortunate "pilgrim," on their return, a single word told the story—"Bu'st'ed."

The bank had only run three nights, but the current of luck had been steadfast to the fortunes of the Celestials. Many a swaggering miner had carried a little buck-skin bag, swelled with yellow dust almost to bursting, into the Chinese shanty, and, an hour or so afterward, had retired with that buck-skin bag so lean and thin that the contents wouldn't have bought a box of oaps.

Doc Kidder hummed an operatic air to himself as he walked, with a light, springy step, up the bank of the river toward the Chinese Camp. Kidder was wonderfully young for a man of his age; time had dealt lightly with him: he never got excited, and an even temper is a wonderful preventative against age.

As he walked on, his mind continually reverted to the fortune-teller. That young woman had made a most decided impression upon the cold, passionless gambler.

Kidder was just a little given to superstition though, and that fact fully accounted for the impression that the words of the oracle of fortune had made upon him.

But Kidder had fully made up his mind to test the truth of the fortune-teller's warning by "going" for the monte bank.

The Chinese Camp consisted of one large shanty, one small one and three caves, hollowed out in the side of the hill wherein the mine was located. Twenty mild-faced, almond-eyed Chinamen composed the inhabitants of the place.

In the large shanty the monte bank was located.

As Kidder approached, he met Johnny Bird coming from the shanty.

Kidder noticed that the "gay young rooster from the Geyser Spring" did not look as cheerful and as light-hearted as usual.

"What luck, Johnny?" Kidder asked.

"They've bu'st'ed me, Doc, for sure," Johnny replied.

"Anybody winning?"

"Nary time," responded Johnny, tersely. "I tell yer, it's a grizzly, claws and all! If you don't believe me, jest go in and try. If they don't skin you, then you kin jest take my head and bile it for a cabbage!" And then Johnny went on in the darkness.

Kidder entered the shanty. The game was going on briskly as he appeared upon the scene. Two flour-barrels, supporting a broken door, served for a table. Upon it the lay-out was spread.

There was quite a number present representing the Bar, and to their credit be it said, they were losing their gold-dust freely, and in an off-hand and reckless manner.

As Kidder afterward expressed it, it did him good to "see the boys from the Bar keep their end up so well, and sock down their gold-dust in so keardless a way as to make the sharps from Get-up Gulch and Poor-shoot City turn pale with envy."

"It's fire and fall back," said a big fellow, in a blue flannel shirt, to Kidder, as he retired from the game, broke.

Nothing daunted, Kidder went at it. There was a yell of salutation from the "boys" as Kidder "tackled" the "animal."

Doc was well known for forty miles around, and, as he was reputed to be one of the luckiest men that ever tempted fortune at a game of cards in the Wisdom valley, there was a general exclamation of delight when he went into the game.

The fact was, the "boys" were a good deal puzzled at the way things had been running at Chinese Camp. Either there was cheating round the board, or the Celestials were having an enormous run of luck. Of course, if any cheating had been discovered, the settlement of Chinese Camp would have been cleaned out in "two jumps of a flea!" as John Turner—one of the prominent men for Get-up Gulch—had remarked. But the closest watch had not been able to detect a sign of foul play as yet. But, when Kidder "squared himself and bucked the bank," lively times were anticipated.

"How y' do, John?" Kidder said, as he tossed a silver-piece on the board.

"How y', 'Melican man?" the Celestial replied, with a smile that was calm and gentle, and then, in a minute more, he raked in Kidder's dollar.

It was only a dollar, but the spirits of the "boys" from Humbug Bar went down below zero. They had confidently expected to see Kidder beat the bank from the jump; and then, too, the fellows from the "Gulch" and the "City" indulged in scornful remarks regarding the "pride" of the Bar, and were only silenced by Kidder observing, quietly, "that if any gentleman in the room thought that he could flax him in a little game of draw-poker, he was their man, and that it took money to buy land." And, as the sarcastic gentlemen were clean broke—the Chinese monte-dealer had taken their money, so that they wouldn't lose it on their way home—they couldn't accept Kidder's bold defiance.

After losing his stake, Kidder remained quiet and watched the game for a short time.

The stakes offered were very low; the miners began to get the idea into their heads that the board was bewitched, and that a white man's money would stand "no chance, nohow."

The Chinese dealer sat blandly impassive.

"S'pose 'Melican man playee, he win allee time," he said, cooing, softly, like an enraptured turtle-dove.

Suddenly Kidder, who had stepped back a pace among the crowd, again advanced to the table.

"Let's play for enough to be interesting," he said, and he tossed a buck-skin bag full of gold-dust down on the board. "What's the use of fooling, gentlemen?" he added. "We might as well go it while we're young. Just weigh that, John, and then go ahead with your bird's eggging; and, as I want to make the game interesting, I'll take a side bet of three to two from any gentleman in the room that I lose."

There was a moment of silence. Kidder's cool offer astonished the gamblers.

The bank had been winning almost constantly for four successive nights, and yet, so strong was the prestige of Kidder's luck, that not one in the room dared to bet him three to two that he would lose.

The little eyes of the Chinaman who was dealing glittered as the solid buck-skin bag bounced down upon the table.

He had raked in Kidder's dollar, and he doubted not that the gold-dust would follow.

One of the assistants of the dealer weighed the dust.

"Five ounces, 'Melican man."

"Spread yourself, John, and wade in!" Kidder cried.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MONTE BANK.

ALL within the shanty crowded nearer to the table, and the busy hum of conversation was entirely suspended as the Chinaman dealt.

Forth came the cards. Then a long-drawn breath and then a yell. Kidder had won.

The face of the Chinese dealer turned a sickly yellow as he looked at the faces of the cards, and then

surveyed the dirty yellow bag that now seemed to his vision to be almost as big as a flour-sack.

Slowly the assistant weighed out the five ounces of gold-dust and transferred them to Kidder. It was a heavy amount for the bank to lose at one stake.

Then Kidder again retired from the table and amused himself by looking on at the game for a while.

The "boys" from the Bar were jubilant, while the "sharps" from the "Gulch" and "City" hadn't a word to say for themselves.

Then Kidder stepped forward again and put his dust down on the board; this time both bags, making ten ounces in all.

This was serious business. The dealer looked fairly pale.

He said a few words in his native tongue to his assistant, and he at once proceeded to weigh the dust belonging to the bank.

It was evident that the dealer hesitated to accept so large a stake.

"I'm right after you, John," Kidder said, with his icy smile.

The dealer tried to smile in return, but the effort was a failure.

The assistant weighed the dust and reported the amount to the dealer, who was evidently the head of the concern. Then the two held quite a conversation in their native tongue.

Kidder, with his usual quiet smile, watched them closely.

Finally, the dealer turned his attention to the game again.

"Allee right, playee 'Melican man ten ounces."

Kidder looked the Chinaman straight in the eye for a moment, then he leaned over the table and shook his finger impressively in the face of the dealer.

"I want a square deal, John, or there'll be trouble in the Camp," Kidder said, in his cool, quiet way.

The dealer was strangely affected; his little eyes rolled imploringly in his head, and his face became almost white. He wasn't one-half as cool as the practiced gamester whose ten ounces lay on the board.

If the game went against him, the bank was broke, while with Kidder it was an every-day occurrence.

"Me playee fair, allee time," the dealer said, earnestly. And if the Celestial had glanced around him at the bearded faces of the men by whom he was surrounded, he could easily have told that he could expect but little mercy at their hands if he was detected in any foul play.

"Now, go ahead, John; give us a deal, for I want to get back to the Bar before it gets late."

With trembling hands the dealer manipulated the papers.

It was only a moment of suspense, and then a torrent of oaths came from the lips of the miners.

The bank had won!

"Allee playee fair," the dealer said, earnestly. He did not offer to remove the stakes, but looked into Kidder's face to see if he was perfectly satisfied.

"That's all square, John; rake 'em in," Kidder said, pleasantly, rolling a cigarette between his thumb and finger. "Any gentleman got a match?"

And Jim Turner, the bitter enemy of the Bar and all its inhabitants, as a good citizen of Get-up Gulch ought to be, stepped forward, completely overcome by the magnificent exhibition of coolness on the part of Kidder, and not only tendered him a match, but offered, if Kidder was going to the Bar, to walk along a bit with him.

So Kidder bid the dealer a kind "good-night," said that he should make it a point to go for him again, and, arm in arm with Turner, left the shanty.

The backers of the monte-bank breathed easier when Kidder departed.

And while Doc Kidder was so boldly trying to cut the claws of the "tiger," there was another little scene transpiring in a corner of the shanty.

As the crowd gathered in to the table, to watch the issue of Kidder's bold defiance, two men were brought face to face. One started in surprise, while the other did not seem to notice the first at all.

The crowd swayed in, crowding round the game, and the two men were separated.

The first, who had seemed so agitated at the sight of the other, was joined by two more men.

The three were Jim York, Kangaroo, and Rackensack.

"I've seen him!" cried York, hurriedly, as the two others came up to him.

"Who?" Kangaroo asked in astonishment.

"Dick Talbot!"

The name he uttered affected the other men fully as much as York's meeting Talbot face to face.

"The devil!" Kangaroo growled in anger.

"I thought the cuss was dead," Rackensack observed.

"I had hoped so," York said, his brow gloomy, and his face furrowed by the lines of thought.

"He must have as many lives as a cat," Kangaroo added.

"I cannot understand it," York muttered, thoughtfully.

"Understand what?" asked Rackensack, overhearing the muttered words of the other.

"Why, how this man lives," he replied.

"Let us waylay him as he leaves the Camp tonight, and knock him in the head," Kangaroo suggested.

"That will be our best course," York replied, "if we can only succeed in doing so."

"Oh, that will be easy enough!" Rackensack cried, confidently.

"It may not be as easy as you think," York thought.

"Why, do you think that he recognized you?" Kangaroo asked, anxiously.

"No; I do not think that he did," York replied.

"I have changed a great deal since he has seen me. He did not seem to notice me at all."

"Where is he, anyway?" Rackensack asked.

"Yonder; his back is to us now."

The three had drawn out of the crowd, and were apart from all the others in the room, in one corner of the shanty.

"Next to the Indian?" Rackensack asked, as he looked in the direction indicated.

"Yes."

And then, to the astonishment of the three, they

saw that Talbot and the Indian were evidently companions.

"That knocks our little game in the head," Kangaroo observed; "he and the red-skin are side-partners. We might flax out one man, but two on 'em would be mighty apt to trouble us."

"Them Injuns fight like blazes, sometimes, too," Rackensack remarked.

"We'll attend to our other work, first, and then fix him," York observed, and his brow was dark and gloomy as he looked upon his foe. "Twice he has escaped me, but the third time, I'll swear, I'll have him. He's had the devil's own luck so far."

Just at that moment the deal which cost Kidder his ten ounces was dealt, and the crowd spread out from the table.

York laid his hands upon the arms of his two companions.

"Come, let us get out," he said. "Never mind this fellow to-night. We'll get a whack at him before we are many days older."

Then the three took advantage of the confusion attending Kidder's withdrawal to leave the shanty.

But York, keen-eyed as he was, had calculated wrongly.

Talbot had both seen and recognized him, and though he had not seemed to watch York, yet he had watched the door, and saw the departure of the three.

"Come," he said, to the Indian, who was the Black-foot chief, Mud Turtle.

"Where go?" asked the chief.

"You remember Barrel Camp?"

The Indian grunted.

"Jim York, Rackensack and Kangaroo are here."

The Indian significantly laid his hand upon the handle of his scalping-knife.

"Wait! that will come in time," Talbot said.

Another moment and they stood beneath the stars.

CHAPTER XXVII. THE NIGHT TRAIL.

THE moon was coming slowly up, and by its dim light Talbot and the Indian could discern the dark figures of the three men standing together, apparently conversing, close by the bank of the river.

The two watchers remained in the shadow of the shanty, thus eluding observation.

For about five minutes the three stood motionless, then they separated; one went down the trail toward the Bar, while the other two struck off northward toward the mountains.

By the dim, uncertain light it was a difficult matter to recognize any of the three; but Talbot guessed that York was one of the two who had gone northward. He could only judge by the outline of the dark figure, but the single man who had gone to the south, seemed to be shorter and stouter than York.

"I have an idea that we are on the right track," he said, hurriedly, to the Indian. "We must not lose sight of these fellows until we track them to their lairs."

"Mud Turtle know, good," said the Indian, laconically.

"You follow the fellow down the river, and I'll track the other two. They have gone toward the hills. I'll stake five to one that they are bound for the cavern of the road agents."

"Me think so, too, heap," said the chief.

"Of with you, then; I'll see you in the morning at the Waterproof, if we don't run across each other before."

Then Talbot left the shadow of the Chinaman's shanty, and struck upon the trail of the two who had gone northward, while the Indian, gliding noiselessly through the darkness, tracked the single man who had followed the path down the river.

It was no easy task that the two had taken upon the selves, when they set out to play the spy upon Jim York and his companions.

The light of the moon was growing stronger and stronger, as it mounted higher and higher in the dark-blue sky. All conspired to aid the men who were tracked, and to baffle the trackers.

Talbot moved with extreme caution. When he quitted the shadow of the shanty, he was compelled to pass across a little open space which afforded no means of concealment, but, once over it and on the other side, he took advantage of every boulder and tree and clump of bushes to mask his pursuit.

But, in spite of all his caution, he could not move onward with the catlike tread of the moccasined Indian, who glided forward, stealing from rock to bush, and from bush to tree, more like some unquiet ghost than one of mortal flesh.

The heavy soles of Talbot's boots would rasp now and then upon the jagged rocks, whose rough edges cropped forth out of the virgin soil; the bush would fly back when released from the pressure of his form.

The two men whose footsteps Talbot was tracking with all the zeal of the blood-hound, went on at first carelessly and without caution. The echoes of their steps rung out clear and full upon the mountain air; but, as they followed the little trail which wound deeper and deeper into the wilderness, they proceeded more carefully. The sound of their footsteps—Talbot's only guide, for he did not dare approach near enough to distinguish their figures—grew fainter and fainter.

"They must be gaining on me," murmured Talbot, communing with himself, when this fact became apparent to him. "They have increased their pace."

But hardly had the words left his lips, when he became convinced that he was wrong in thinking so. The two had evidently taken the alarm.

Then the trail wound out through the pine forest into a little open plain; beyond the plain the dark walls of a canyon rose in sight.

The sound of footsteps ceased; either the two men were lying in ambush on the other side of the opening in the mouth of the canyon, or else they were proceeding onward with extreme caution.

Talbot did not dare to venture into the circle of light—the open space lit by the moonbeams.

If the two were concealed in the canyon, they could easily shoot him down as he advanced, if they felt inclined so to do.

Dick was certain from their mysterious actions that they were following the wild trail for no good purpose, and felt sure that they would not hesitate to remove a spy from their path with as little

hesitation as they would tread upon a lizard in their way.

So Talbot crouched down behind a boulder, his revolver ready in his hand, and waited.

The wind surged through the trees; the noises of the night denizens of the pine wood and of the rocky plain came clear and shrill to his ears; but sound of human presence he heard not.

Ten—twenty minutes the watch remained quiet, then he rose to his feet and walked slowly across the little open space, his revolver loose in his hand, but no trace of foe could he see. All was quiet as though a human foot had never waked the echoes of the primeval forest since the Creation day.

In the mouth of the canyon, Dick halted and held council with himself.

"Shall I turn back or go on?" he muttered. "York has some purpose in view, or else he would never have followed this lonely trail. What object can he have in coming this way, and midnight approaching? This is only an old Indian trail over the mountains. By Jove!" and Talbot started as the thought again came to him. "If there's a league between this fellow, York, and the road-agents! Why not? He's a reckless and unscrupulous fellow, and they say that this Rocky Mountain Rob has secret agents in all the principal towns. This trail may lead straight to the cave of the outlaws. I'll follow it, and if York is one of the road-agents, so much the better; I can pay off both the old and the new score together."

And then again Talbot proceeded onward.

For half an hour he followed the winding path, and then, to his astonishment, he came into the open space through which, from the twin canyons, flowed the two branches of the subterranean stream.

As Talbot had guessed, the trail led to the outlaws' retreat.

"York is one of the outlaw gang," he muttered, as he crouched down behind a rock, finding shelter, like a beast of prey, under cover of a mass of raspberry bushes. "Now, if I remain here, I may discover something that will aid me to sweep these villains from the earth. This is not the first time that I have hidden here, almost within pistol-shot of the outlaws' refuge; but the situation is a little different now, and I think that I am master of it." And Talbot laughed quietly to himself, as he handled the revolvers strapped to his side. "Last night they hunted me; to-night I hunt them. Quite a difference."

Then to Talbot's mind came the thought of another incident connected with the open space on the edge of which he lay concealed. The dark-eyed stranger who sought his life.

"What the deuce have I ever done to him, I wonder?" Talbot mused. "I must have wronged him in some terrible way or else he would not be so eager to send me to the land of spirits. By Jove! I must look out for myself; if I am not careful, I may have to 'wing' this strange being in self-defense."

The meditations of Injun Dick were suddenly disturbed by sounds which told that man was near. Dick crouched closer to the earth, flattened out like a huge snake.

From the larger canyon came a single man, who advanced into the space with careless steps. He was a huge-bearded fellow, dressed roughly. In the daylight one would have taken him to be an honest miner.

The stranger, as he came on, looked carefully around him, then stopped in the center of the opening and listened.

Talbot guessed at once that he was a scout sent on in advance to see if the way was clear.

Satisfied with his scrutiny, the man put his fingers in his mouth and gave a loud, shrill whistle. A minute or so afterward there came to the listening ears of Talbot the tread of many feet.

Louder and louder the noise grew, until at last a dozen or fifteen well-armed men stood in the open space, the soft light of the moonbeams shining down bright upon them, and playing in wavy lines of light upon the bright-bladed bowie-knives, thrust sheathless through their belts, and on the silver-mounted hilts of the revolvers of the chief of the band who stood in the center of the throng.

The first glance at the masked and armed men and Talbot knew that he beheld the road-agents of Rocky Mountain Rob.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE RAID ON THE "HEATHEN."

"ALL clear?" asked the leader of the outlaws, and Talbot recognized at once that it was the terrible road-agent in person. He had not forgotten the voice which had doomed him to the awful death, from which he had been rescued by the rattlesnake.

"All right, Cap," the scout responded.

"Go on ahead, then," Rob said; "go slow and keep your wits about you. We must not make the attack until about one. We must allow time enough for the game to shut up and the miners to get away. The 'Johns' will be easy enough to handle, but two or three of the 'sharps' from the Valley would be apt to worry us a little."

"I understand, Cap," the scout replied.

"Go on."

Then the scout struck into the trail by which Talbot had come to the opening, and which led down to the banks of the Wisdom.

The main body of the outlaws waited some ten minutes; then Rob gave the command to march, and in single file, Indian fashion, they followed in the footsteps of the scout.

The road-agents passed so near to Talbot that he could have easily reached forth his hand and touched them.

Tramp—tramp!

The sound of the measured step of the outlaws rose and fell on the air, ringing out sharply at first, but growing fainter and fainter as the march led down toward the valley; they soon ceased altogether, and then Talbot rose from his lair amid the bushes.

The few words which he had overheard revealed to him the purpose of the midnight march of the outlaws. It was their intent to attack the Chinese Camp and wrest from the celestials their precious gold-dust.

"I need not hurry myself much to track them, now that I know where they are going," Talbot muttered; "and it will only be prudent not to follow upon their heels too closely, for some one of them might take it into his head to loiter behind the rest, and,

though I should not fear to encounter one of the scoundrels, the noise of our struggle would bring all the rest back upon us."

And so Dick waited twenty minutes at least before he took the trail leading to the river.

Cautiously, revolver in hand, he stole onward along the winding way. He knew not but at any moment he might stumble upon the robber band; but, as there were so many of them, he doubted not that he could detect them before they could him.

At last he came within ear-shot of the Chinese Camp, and still no sound hovering on the air told of the presence of the armed ruffians.

Talbot again sought concealment in the bushes, but hardly had he extended himself upon the ground when to his ears came the sound of a man's fist knocking against a door. It was one of the road-agents trying to gain entrance to the shanty.

Determined to look upon the scene of horror which he felt sure would soon come, Dick slowly and cautiously crawled through the bushes, fearful that at any moment he might stumble upon some of the outlaws concealed in the thicket.

But precaution was needless, as he soon discovered the moment he reached the edge of the bushes. The road-agents, in a circle, had surrounded the house, waiting the result of their comrade's parley with the Chinamen.

To the first knock at the door of the shanty the inmates made no reply, and, just as Talbot came to the edge of the opening, the outlaw knocked again, louder than before.

"What wantee?" demanded one of the "Johns," evidently aroused by the noise.

"Got a sick man hyer," answered the outlaw; "I'm feared he'll die ef I don't get him shelter. His leg's broke, I s'pose. He tumbled down a rock a lee-tle way back."

"No open, 'Mellican man," the Chinaman replied, tersely.

"Blazes! you won't let the man die out hyer in the bush, will yer?" the outlaw demanded, in pretended indignation.

"Getee way—me shootee!" cried the "John," threateningly.

"The blazes you will!" cried the outlaw, in a rage. "Jest fire a shot an' we'll string the hull of yer up like inyons?"

"Yell, boys!" cried Rob, sharply, and then the wild halloo of the ruffians rung on the air, followed by twenty or thirty revolver shots, which rattled like hail against the sides of the shanty. Evidently it was the object of the outlaws to frighten the Chinamen, and thus force them to yield without resistance.

Deliberately two of the stoutest of the outlaws raised a huge stone and cast it against the door. The rock broke in the fragile obstruction instantly, and then, yelling like demons, the outlaws rushed into the shanty.

The Chinamen, frightened at the numbers of the assailants, did not attempt to resist, but suffered themselves to be dragged out by their long cues, pleading in pitiful accents for mercy.

"Whar's your dust?" the outlaws cried.

"Me gotee no dustee!" the poor heathens replied, in terror—a reply which was received by the outlaws with a shout of laughter.

Striking a light, the brigands searched the shanty, but found only a small quantity of gold-dust, a circumstance which disappointed them greatly, for they had counted upon extracting a rich booty from the heathen Chinese.

The chief one of the Chinamen was the one who had acted as dealer of the *monte* bank—a fact that seemed known to the outlaw chief, for, when the road-agents sacked the shanty and reported the amount of gold-dust, Rob gave utterance to a bitter oath, and, pointing to the Chinaman who was standing in the center of the little group of trembling men, said:

"Bring that fellow to me—the old one without shoes."

A dozen hasty, rough hands instantly seized the unfortunate celestial.

"Where's your dust, John?" Rob cried, sharply.

"Me no gottee dustee, muchee," the heathen replied, trembling.

Then Rob drew one of his silver-mounted revolvers from its pouch, deliberately cocked it, and placed the cold muzzle against the temple of the Chinaman. "Now, you yellow dog, spit out where you buried your dust, or I'll send you to your father, the devil, instanter," he cried, sternly.

The unfortunate Chinaman trembled so that but for the support of the road-agents, who still kept their rude hands upon him, he would have fallen to the ground.

But, even with the cold press of the revolver upon his brow, he either would not or could not tell the hiding-place of the gold-dust.

"The yellow heathen shall tell, or I'll cut his heart out for the dogs to eat," the outlaw said, though hesitating to pull the trigger, for he knew that the death of the man would not give him the dust, and possibly, being the chief man of the shanty, he was the only one who knew the hiding-place of the treasure.

"Make a fire some of you," was the next command of Rob. And, while the road-agents hurried to obey, two more, at Rob's order, bound the Chinaman hand and foot with cords.

A huge fire blazed out, and then they placed the helpless Chinaman so that the fire would toast his feet, and inch by inch, as Rob dictated, they moved the helpless man nearer and nearer to the fire.

The shrieks and prayers of the tortured man were awful, but the road-agents roared with laughter as they beheld the sufferings of their victim.

Talbot, watching from the thicket, felt his blood run cold with horror. He had often heard of the terrible deeds of the lawless road-agents, but this scene of agony surpassed any brutal act that he had heard ascribed to the outlaws.

Thrice had Talbot drawn back the hammer of his revolver, and thrice he had "covered" Rob with a deadly aim, but the thought was madness. He did not care to give his own life in exchange for the life of the road-agent.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE LAST OF THE CHINESE CAMP.

"CONFESS, you heathen! Where's your gold-dust?" cried the outlaw chief, enraged at the obstinacy of his victim.

"Me no dustee!" exclaimed the Chinaman, between his moans of pain.

"Stick his feet into the fire, the cursed fool!" yelled Rob, brutally.

But before the two outlaws who held the struggling man could obey the order, the victim, with a strength that seemed almost superhuman, broke the bonds which confined his arms, and seizing one of the road-agents by the throat, endeavored to choke him; the man was crazy with pain.

Over the ground rolled the two in close embrace, but the knife of the other ruffian who had previously held the victim, quickly settled the contest, and with a groan of anguish the unfortunate Chinaman released his hold on the throat of the outlaw, much to the relief of that worthy, and falling on his back, died almost without a groan.

"You cursed fool!" cried the outlaw chief, in a rage, "what did you do that for?"

"He was a strangling Bill," replied the ruffian, sullenly, wiping his knife as he spoke on the skirt of his coat, while "Bill" rose to his feet, his neck still livid from the clasp of the man whom they tortured to desperation.

"He would have saved the hangman some trouble," Rob said, grimly. Then he turned to the little group of Chinese, who stood trembling with fear a dozen paces off.

"I've half a mind to throw you into the fire, one by one, and roast you!" he exclaimed, savagely.

Down on their knees in an agony of fear went the unfortunate men.

Their despairing cries came out shrill on the night air. Little feeling of mercy had the outlaw though; his iron heart knew no touch of tenderness or leniency.

"Where's the dust?" shouted Rob, sternly.

Quickly and eagerly the affrighted men denied all knowledge of any treasure concealed in the shanty.

"The cursed whelps!" cried the chief, in a rage, "they value their gold-dust more than they do their lives."

"We'd better hurry up, Cap," one of the ruffians said to Rob; "we've been a long time about this job now."

"Set fire to the shanty!" ordered Rob. "If the dust is concealed inside, we'll fix it so that they sha'n't have it, if they deny it to us."

With many a wild shout and curse the road-agents snatched burning brands, and in a minute or so the flames burst forth from the shanty.

A howl of despair came from the lips of the heathen as they beheld the destruction of their home.

"The next one that howls pitch him into the fire!" cried Rob; then an idea struck the outlaw chief.

"Here, some of you fellows, cut off the pig-tails of the cusses; they'll do for mule-whips!"

A shout of laughter went up from the band. They all knew how dear to the heart of the Celestial was the cherished "cue."

The ruffians did not wait for a second bidding, but in a trice, with their sharp bowie-knives, shaved off the pig-tail from the head of every Chinaman.

Low, but deep, were the moans of anguish which came from the lips of the Celestials at this degradation.

The flames from the burning house began to reddens the sky as the fire shot up in the air from the roof.

"The heathen ought to be cleaned out, anyway," muttered Rob, as if to partially excuse the outrage which his band had committed. "They've no business here, taking the bread out of the mouths of honest white men."

"That's so," cried another one of the gang.

The flames shot up, brighter and brighter.

Talbot had retired further into the shelter of the bushes, as the lurid light lit up the scene. He had carefully scrutinized the persons of the outlaws, trusting to find some clue as to who they were. The effort had been a fruitless one, though, for all the ruffians wore black masks which fully concealed their features, and as they were dressed in the rough and careless style peculiar to the mountain mining region, Dick could not hope to identify any one of the actors in the terrible tragedy.

He had carefully studied the walk and bearing of the several outlaws, as they had moved up and down in the light of the burning house, thinking that he could tell Jim York, disguised though he was; but not one of the ruffians seemed to be the man he was in search of.

As the flames blazed up brighter and brighter, Rob gave the signal for their retreat, and in five minutes more the sound of their footsteps died away.

Talbot did not attempt to follow; he had learnt all that it was possible for him to know at present. Nor did he step forth into the opening where the almond-eyed sons of the East were weeping loud and sore at the calamity which had come upon them. Dick, familiar with the ways of the Celestials, knew that they would instantly connect him with the outrage. So he quietly skirted round the clearing until he struck the trail leading down the valley.

Then, as he proceeded onward, the sky around him lit up by the flames of the burning shanty, it occurred to him that it would not be well for him to relate at the Bar what he had witnessed during the past few hours. He was a stranger, and the chances were ten to one that the gentle miners of Humbug would be apt to think that he had some hand in the affair, and Talbot had learned by experience how difficult it was to reason with a mob of free and enlightened citizens, particularly when their blood was up for "justice."

And so, when Talbot came near to the Bar, he left the main road and took a trail leading along the mountain side.

Some of the "night birds" of the Bar happened to see the light of the flames reflected along the sky, and quite a little knot of people were gathered in front of the Waterproof saloon, discussing the fire.

Talbot, striking down from the hill-side, came upon the group from the rear. It was now about four o'clock, and the morning was near at hand. Dick retired to his room, threw himself upon his bed without undressing, and in five minutes was in the land of dreams.

With the morning light came a messenger from the Chinese Camp who told the sad story of the outlaws' raid.

The miners looked blank as they listened to the fearful tale—not that they cared so much about the wrong done to the "heathen," as they termed the simple, hard-working sons of the Flowery Land—but that each man mentally speculated how long it would be before some lonely white man's cabin in the mountain gulches would be ravaged by the outlaws, in search of gold-dust.

And great was the discussion at the breakfast-room of the Waterproof saloon that morning, regarding the outrage, and many dark intimations that Judge Lynch would have to take a hand in the game "afore long," passed from lip to lip.

After his breakfast was over, Colonel Jacks started for the mine in which he was interested. Since his interview with the fortune-teller, the colonel had meditated a great deal upon the statements she had made, and the more he thought about the matter the greater became the puzzle.

One thing, though, he had made up his mind to, and that was to find the man who had called himself John Rimee and question him regarding his history.

And as the colonel walked along, the subject came again to his mind, and then, too, he remembered the declaration of the fortune-teller that he would gain no information from John Rimee.

"We shall see," he muttered, nervously grasping his cane with an iron gripe and knitting his brows together. "And why does the girl or woman, whatever she is, seem to take such an interest in me and mine?" he mused. "There was more than the jargon of the propheticess in her speech."

His way led right past the shanty occupied by the fortune-teller. A curious glance he gave at the house as he passed, and then, as he turned the angle beyond, following the line of the hill, he came upon the very man he had wished to see.

Colonel Jacks and the dark-haired, dark-eyed young stranger who called himself John Rimee were face to face.

CHAPTER XXX.

RIMEE AND THE COLONEL.

The recognition was mutual as John Rimee and Colonel Jacks came together, but not agreeable to both.

Rimee hesitated, then drew back a step as if with a wish to avoid the meeting; but that was impossible, for the two were not three feet apart.

The old colonel looked at the face of the young man with a great deal of curiosity. Every feature was familiar to him. The woman, dead and hidden in an unknown grave, rose again before him.

The jet-black hair, curling in little crispy curls, the eyes, lustrous with light and dark as the sheen of sable silk, the olive-tinged face, each feature so perfectly cut, the full red lips and little white teeth.

It was the face of the woman whom he had once so madly loved he looked upon, except that the slight down of a mustache shaded the upper lip of the young stranger.

The colonel's keen eyes noticed the hesitation of the young man in an instant, and that hesitation half confirmed him in the belief that the fortune-teller had really spoken the truth when she had declared that the young stranger was his son, and that the fact was also known to Rimee.

"Good-morning, sir," said the colonel, blandly, but his voice trembled just a little, in spite of his efforts to control it.

"Good-morning," replied Rimee, distantly, and he made a motion as though he would pass to one side and go on.

"Have you heard the news this morning?" the colonel asked, taking a step toward the young man, so that it was almost impossible for him to advance.

"No."

Rimee was evidently ill at ease.

"A terrible outrage by the road-agents of this fellow who calls himself Rocky Mountain Rob. They sacked the Chinese Camp last night and killed one of the principal men there."

"It is very bad," the youth remarked, mechanically.

"Yes." The colonel had not taken his eyes from the face of Rimee since they came together.

"I beg your pardon," the colonel said, suddenly, "but, if you will excuse the liberty, I should like to ask you a few questions."

A shade passed rapidly over the face of Rimee; but quick as it was, it did not escape the watching eyes of the colonel.

Finding that the young man did not reply, the old man went on in his speech.

"If you remember, when I met you before, I took the liberty of asking you some questions."

"Yes, sir, I remember it distinctly," Rimee said, quickly and coldly.

"Ah, you do remember?" The colonel detected anger shining in the dark, handsome eyes, although a strong effort was being made to conceal it. The mask of cold indifference was too slight, though, to deceive the keen-eyed soldier.

"Yes, sir," Rimee said, coldly, and with a touch of haughtiness in his manner. "I frankly say, sir, that I can not understand in what way myself or fortunes can concern you in the least; but you asked me certain questions and I answered them to the best of my ability."

"I again beg your pardon, sir," the colonel said, stiffly, and there was a look in his stern gray eyes which forced the fiery black ones to drop before them, "and I trust you will excuse my questions when I tell you that they are of great importance to me."

"I am at your service, sir," Rimee said, impatiently, and the full red lips came together firmly.

"Your mother's name was Catherine, and you were born in Norfolk, Virginia, twenty-four years ago," the colonel continued, gravely, a peculiar look in his cold gray eyes.

Rimee seemed utterly and thoroughly astonished; there was no mask upon the face now. He stared at the ex-soldier as if he could hardly believe the evidence of his ears.

"You must be laboring under some strange mistake, sir?" Rimee exclaimed, evidently greatly bewildered, "or else I have misunderstood you."

"Perhaps you have; I do not always speak plainly," the colonel rejoined, quietly. "Oblige me with your attention and I will repeat my remark. Your

mother's name was Isabel, and you were born at New Orleans twenty-five years ago."

The hot blood swept over the face of Rimee as the colonel spoke; too late he saw the pitfall which the soldier had dug for him and into which he had fallen.

"Aha! you are silent," the colonel said. "If I had made this last statement first how quickly you would have contradicted it. You were all prepared for that. I am sure now; the information that I have received is correct. And now tell me one thing; why is it that you bear me such a deadly hatred? Did your mother instill it into you with the milk which gave you life?"

With a violent effort Rimee had recovered his self-possession, but the olive-tinged face was paler than it was wont to be.

"I can not understand, sir, why you should take me to be other than I am. I told you on our first meeting that my name was John Rimee, and that I was born in France," he said, coldly.

"But your mother's name?"

"You spoke it but now."

"Isabel?"

"No, Catherine."

"Catherine!" and a quiet smile appeared on the face of the colonel as he uttered the name.

"Yes; you can easily understand my astonishment at hearing you, an entire stranger to me, pronounce the name of my mother."

"Well played, young man," the colonel muttered, to himself, biting the long ends of his mustache.

"I trust that you are perfectly satisfied now that I speak the truth," Rimee said, slowly.

"I am satisfied that you are the child of the woman named Isabel, and who, in New Orleans, twenty-five years ago, was known as Mrs. De Long, the wife of a Creole planter, whose place was just above Shreveport, on the Red river."

"Again I assure you, sir, that you are laboring under some misapprehension," the young man said.

"Perhaps so," the colonel replied, slowly, "but time will tell."

Then the colonel stepped aside so that the young man could go on.

"Good-morning," Rimee said politely, and then hurried round the angle of the hill.

The colonel did not speak, but just nodded his head in answer to the salutation. He remained quite a time, motionless upon the spot where the interview had taken place. Then he seemed to recover himself from the abstraction into which he had fallen, and walked thoughtfully on.

Get-up Gulch, where the mine of the company of which Colonel Jacks was president was located, was some three miles from the Bar, and as the colonel walked on very leisurely, his hands behind him, deep in meditation, it was about an hour before he arrived at the mine.

The colonel entered the shanty, his office, and seating himself, plunged at once into business. The morning's work was transacted as usual, and when noon came, and the colonel was proceeding to dispatch a red herring and a cracker accompanied by a glass of whisky, the president of the Get-up Gulch Mining Company's usual lunch, in walked Jim Turner, and quietly helped himself to an empty herring-box, and sat down.

Turner was a tall, muscular fellow, with a huge brown beard and a shock of brown hair. He was one of the leading men of Get-up Gulch, and owned two-eighths of the "Bull-pout strike," the best paying mine—in a small way—for miles around.

"Hullo, Jim," said the colonel.

"Morning, kurnel," replied Jim, abstractedly.

"Have a herring and a cracker?" the colonel asked, tendering the hospitalities of his mansion.

"Don't keer much for herrin's; much obliged to you all the same, kurnel."

"Take a little rye?" and Jacks held up the bottle.

"Wal, seein' it's you, kurnel, I don't mind ef I do take 'bout four fingers of it," Jim remarked, soberly.

The liquor was poured out and dispatched at a single swallow.

And then, Jacks looked inquiringly at Turner. It was very evident to the colonel that his visitor had something on his mind.

The colonel looked at Turner and Turner looked at the colonel; then Turner removed a huge plug of tobacco from his mouth, got up, turned the herring-box down sideways and mounted it.

"Kurnel, when in the natur' of human events"—then Turner stuck.

"Spit it out, Jim," said the colonel, encouragingly, passing him the bottle.

"Oh, blazes to splinter, kurnel, we're goin' to raise 'arnal smash round hyer, and we want you to head the b'ilin'!"

And then Turner dismounted from the box and took a swig at the bottle.

CHAPTER XXXI.

GET-UP GULCH'S CANDIDATE.

The colonel looked rather astonished at Turner's speech.

"I don't exactly understand, Jim," he said.

"Squar' as a die, kurnel!" Turner exclaimed, emphatically. "Hain't you heerd of that air awful 'fair last night up to Chinese Camp?"

The colonel nodded.

"Wal, now, kurnel, we've got fur to go fur them cusses, or civilization 'round hyer is played out. Ef they had only robbed the 'Johns' of their dust it wouldn't have been so bad, but when they came to roasting 'em in a fire by inches, it's too much for decent white men to stand. I 'low that I don't keer much for the heathen, anyway, and I jest went fur to bust that monte-bank all I knew how, but this hyer b'ilin' last night is too much. It's got to be stopped, kurnel, or whar is the safety of the community? Thar's been a right smart lot of talk 'bout risin' a Vigilance Committee and purifyin' things 'round hyer, an' we free an' enlighten' citizens of Get-up Gulch hev sot in council together, an' arter a general show of hands, we 'low that kurnel you're the man to take the pile ef you keer to straddle the blind. Get-up Gulch puts up her dust on you, every time, kurnel."

"Well, I'm very much obliged to my fellow-citizens of the Gulch for the confidence that they have in me, but a Vigilance Committee to be effective must include all the leading citizens; and in this case,

the Gulch, the Bar and Poor-shoot City ought to all go in together," the colonel said.

"That's jest what we're arter, kurnel!" exclaimed Jim. "This hyer 'fair last night has riled things like blazes. It ain't two or three on us that talks of a committee; it's the hull community. Get-up Gulch has got her back up. Now, kurnel, you know the fact is the Bar has captured 'bout all she wanted; she's got the post-office, the express-office, and when we come to the Vigilantes, she'll go in fur to put up Judge Lynch herself, and I'll 'low that we citizens of the Gulch ain't a-goin' to let the Bar take everything. We want a fair shake in this hyer shindig. Now, you're jest as much a citizen of the Gulch as you are of the Bar, seeing that you're President of the Get-up Gulch Gold Mining Company. And as you stop at the Waterproof saloon in the Bar, they can't in common decency go back on you. And now the p'int is jist hyer. Get-up Gulch is fur you, kurnel, tooth and nail. Will you run ef we nominate yer?"

"Well, Jim, if the citizens of the Gulch see fit to put me up for Judge Lynch, in case the Vigilance Committee is organized, I have too high a respect for their judgment to refuse to act," the colonel said.

"Hooray!" Turner got up, swung his hat, and gave a single cheer.

The colonel bowed.

"It's all right, kurnel; you're the man for the position. Get-up Gulch backs you, every time, and 'tween you and me and the bedpost, kurnel," and here Turner lowered his voice and approached the colonel confidentially, "we've sent out a skirmisher fur to sound the sharps over to Poor-shoot City; ef the city goes fur you we kin run you in for sure. I reckon, kurnel, you ought for to be a pretty pop'lar man with the boys over thar."

"Yes, I ought to be; I am also president of the Poor-shoot City Gulch Mining Company, you know."

"Sartin! Oh, we kin run you in, kurnel. I heerd some of the sharps up at the Bar—I was over thar this mornin'—'low that old Pop Shook would make a good judge; now, kurnel, I ain't the man to say a word ag'in' Old Pop when compounding a cocktail is concerned, and I stand ready to back him ag'in' any four men in the hull of Montana for preaching a real dig-your-soul-up-by-the-roots discourse on Sunday. He's got true religion, the old bald-headed cuss has; and when it comes to mixing liquors to suit a gentleman's mouth, why, the old red-headed galoot kin stand on one leg and flax the hull on 'em. I don't go back on the old man any time, but he's no more fit to be Judge Lynch than I am to run a first-class prayer-meetin'; that's honest now, kurnel."

The colonel was obliged to admit that he thought that Shook was not equal to the office.

"But, kurnel, you're the man to run the machine!" Turner cried, in admiration. "I don't want to flatter you a mite, you know; I don't run any shaft in that mine; but when we put a man up fur to hold life and death in his hands, we want him to be squar' and correct. Kurnel, you've seen fire, fightin' for your country; and I take it that, ef it come to going fur these cusses and a-wiping 'em off the face of the yearth, you know when and how to go fur 'em in reg'lar style; and I jest tell you, kurnel, Get-up Gulch is with you every time."

The colonel again bowed his acknowledgment of Turner's compliments.

"Much obleeged, kurnel," Turner added, backing to the door of the shanty; "the boys kinder wanted me to come and see how the keerds were running afore they 'chipped' in; but, seein' as every thing is correct, fur the last time, kurnel, I repeat, Get-up Gulch puts up her dust on you, and she'll break the bank fur you or bu'st."

Then Mr. Turner withdrew and proceeded to "carry the news to Mary" that the "kurnel" had consented to "stand" to the "boys" assembled in solemn conclave at the Nip-and-tuck Hotel, the principal saloon in Get-up Gulch City.

And while the interview was taking place between the colonel and the representative of the mining town, another scene was in progress in the bar-room of the Waterproof Hotel at the Bar.

Just about half-past twelve, Jim York had walked into the saloon and asked for a glass of whisky. It being the dinner-hour the saloon was deserted, Shook alone being present attending to the bar.

The old man looked at York for a moment, made no motion toward serving him.

"Will you oblige me with a glass of whisky?" York asked, a frown upon his dark face; and, as he spoke, he took a silver dollar from his pocket and laid it on the counter.

Shook quietly pushed the dollar back to York.

"What do you mean?" York demanded, in astonishment, and the visible signs of rage beginning to appear on his face.

"Your money ain't good, hyer," Shook said, quietly.

"What do you mean by that?" York exclaimed, hastily.

"I mean jist what I say," replied the old man, firmly; "and I say it over ag'in so that you kin understand me. I say that your money ain't good at this hyer bar."

"Do you think the piece is bad?" York exclaimed; "if you do, here's a half-dozen more; pick out one to suit you," and as he spoke he rattled the dollars down on the counter.

"I don't say that your money's bad," Shook replied, getting red in the face, "but I do say that it ain't good hyer, and you'll greatly oblige me ef you'll walk out of that door and never come inside of it again. Now, that's good plain English, Mr. York."

"Yes, very plain," York said, with a scornful laugh. "I s'pose a man may ask an explanation of such treatment, mayn't he?"

"I hain't got any time to talk to you!" Shook exclaimed, shortly, turning away.

"By Satan, you shall give me an explanation!" York cried, and he brought his clenched fist down upon the counter with a violence that made the bar shake.

"Look a-here! I don't want any loud talk hyer!" Shook cried, very red in the face, and he thrust his hand under the counter as if to grasp a weapon.

York looked at him with a scornful smile.

"Oh, you needn't try that game on!" he exclaimed. "It ain't come to shooting-irons between us yet."

You've insulted me, and you're no man if you don't give me an explanation."

The old man looked for a moment into the threatening eyes of York, and came instantly to the conclusion that he had better get rid of him peacefully.

"Now, see hyer, York," he said, half in entreaty, "I don't want to have any trouble with you, but I don't want you to come round hyer any more. You know what the reason is as well as I do. My gal ain't for you."

"Not for me, eh?" and there was a peculiar smile upon York's face. Shook was not an adept at reading thoughts in faces; if he had been, that quiet smile would have troubled him.

"No, and you might as well know it, fust as last, and, as a friend, I'll jest give you a word of advice; jest you git out while you kin; things are workin', and thar'll be a hurricane 'round hyer fust thing you know. And when the hurricane comes, them folks what plays keerds for a living had better be emigrating."

York smiled sarcastically; it was not the first time he had heard of a Vigilance Committee; but, grown bold by impunity, he laughed at the idea. He had heard the cry of "wolf" too often.

"When the Vigilantes tackle me, maybe they'll have their hands full," York said, significantly.

"I only gi'n you fair warning, that's all," Shook replied.

"Then I'm to understand that my presence is not desired in the Waterproof saloon?"

"When I've got anything to say to a man, I generally spit it right out," Shook's eyes snapped.

"I'm much obliged, old man, for your warning as to the Vigilantes, and as for the other I'll never darken your door again," then York picked up his money and walked out into the street.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

YORK AND BESSIE.

"Not for me!" York repeated, slowly, to himself, as he stood before the door of the saloon. "I'll bet you two to one, Old Shook, that you lie!" he continued, an ugly smile upon his face. Then he glanced up and down the street, thoughtfully. "I wonder if there was any truth in the old man's words about the Vigilantes, or was it only a trick to scare me out of town? Out of sight, out of mind, the old adage says, and the 'sharp' that made it knew woman devilish well; ay, and man, too, for that matter. The old man thinks that if I go away the girl will forget me. Maybe he's right, but I won't give her the chance to rub me out of her memory so easily jist yet. She's mine if I choose to take her, and who's to hinder me, I'd like to know?" and York looked around him defiantly. Then he walked slowly up to the corner of the shanty. As he did so, his eyes fell upon a little group of miners on the other side of the street in front of the "Let-her-rip saloon," and in the middle of the group was a Chinaman, minus the pig-tail, evidently relating the story of the destruction of the Chinese Camp.

York watched the little group for a moment, a dark and angry look upon his face.

"That affair of last night has created a bigger breeze than I anticipated. The cursed fools. What do they want to trouble themselves about the 'Johns' for? They ought to be all driven out of the country by rights. I'm afraid that there's going to be trouble, after all."

York remained for a few minutes motionless, in deep thought. He was thinking of some way to gain an interview with Bessie.

"I'll take her with me if she'll go," he muttered, between his teeth, "even if I have to fight every inch of the way!"

Then the thought suddenly came to him of how he could secure an interview.

Right back of the house was the shanty, which served for a stable; in the rear of the stable was a chicken-coop and yard, and York remembered that he had often seen Bessie after dinner carry the crumbs and scraps out to the fowls.

The plan was simple enough. All he had to do was to lay in the stable till the girl should come.

With York to think was to act, and so he proceeded at once to the stable. His mind fully occupied by thoughts of the girl, he did not notice that, as he turned the corner of the saloon and disappeared behind it, two of the group on the other side of the street detached themselves from the rest and crossed the street, apparently watching him.

The stable, which was nothing but an open shed, stood with its side to the house, so that any one within was fully concealed from all observation from the windows of the hotel.

York had not been twenty minutes in the stable when Bessie entered with a plate full of scraps for the chickens. She started in alarm when she saw York, and the plate dropped to the ground.

York stepped forward at once, grasped her by the wrist, and drew her within the shed fairly out of sight.

"Hush, Bessie," he cried; "don't make a noise. I want to speak to you for a few minutes."

"Oh, Jim, let me go," she said, evidently very much alarmed; but York kept a firm hold upon her wrist.

"Why, Bessie, are you afraid of me?" he exclaimed, reproachfully.

"No, Jim, but—" and then she paused.

"But what?"

"If father should come."

"Well, what of it, even if he should come?"

"Why, he would be very angry, Jim."

"Yes, I suppose so." York's lip curled, contemptuously. "He has just informed me that he prefers I should not enter his door again." And as he spoke he watched the girl's face closely. What he saw there did not appear to please him, for an angry glare came into his eyes.

"And so, Bessie, this I suppose must be our last meeting," and he placed his arm round the girl's waist and drew her up close to him. He could feel that she was trembling in every limb. Bitter curses were on his tongue, but, with a great effort, he forced them back, and strove to keep his temper.

"Yes, our last meeting," the girl replied, mechanically.

"And you are willing that it should be so?" he asked, with ill-disguised contempt.

"What can I do?" she rejoined, innocently.

"Father told me that he would never give his consent to my having you, and made me promise to give you up altogether."

"And did you give him such a promise?" York asked, outwardly calm, but the raging fires of angry passion burning in his veins.

"What could I do?" she asked, helplessly.

"Do?" he cried, almost fiercely. "Why, stand up for the man you love, though all the world should come between us and bid you to forget me!"

The girl trembled at his angry manner.

"But, Jim, I ought to do what father tells me," she murmured.

"When he tells you to forget the man that you love? And you do love me, Bessie, don't you?"

At the moment that he put the question the trembling girl seemed more given to fear than love.

"I don't know," she murmured, evidently bewildered.

"Don't know?" and York's face grew white, a sure sign in him of terrible rage. "By Heaven, Bessie, I took you to be a braver girl than to give up the man you love at a word. You do love me, I know it, and for my part I swear that I'll never give you up! You are mine, and, Bessie, I'll take you in spite of a thousand fathers!"

"Oh, Jim, don't talk so dreadfully!" the girl cried, in alarm. "I know that I have acted very foolishly; I can't tell what set me on to flirt with you; and, Jim, I don't believe that I do really love you well enough to run away and leave my folks for you."

As he heard this speech, 'twas in the heart of York to raise his arm and strike the girl to his feet, so bitter was his rage; while she, happening to look up in his face, recoiled from him in terror.

"Oh, you are a true woman!" he cried, bitterly.

"You go jist so far, and then say, coolly, 'Stop, I must go back.' Did it ever occur to you that, when you tried to make me your slave, it might end in my being your master? Bessie, I am sure that you do care for me, though, like a coward, you have let them persuade you that you do not. Why, girl, if you will only go with me, I can make a very queen out of you. I can give you diamonds brighter than your eyes. I'll take you East; you shall shine in the big cities there, and with your beauty and my money you'll have the multitude at your feet, and not one of them will guess that you're the daughter of old Pop Shook, who runs the Waterproof saloon at Humbug Bar. Why, Bessie, I've got more money than any man in Montana."

The girl opened her eyes in astonishment. She knew that York always appeared to have plenty of money, but report said that he was always successful at cards.

"Why, where did you make your money, Jim?" she asked, in wonder.

"Oh, I found a 'pocket' out in the mountain," he answered, carelessly, laughing. "Why, Bess, the virgin gold lies there in lumps as big as your fist. Nothing to do but put your hand down and pick 'em up. But, come, Bessie, girl; you won't give me up jist because your father has taken a dislike to me? You see, Bess, I've got enemies who have talked to him until he thinks that I'm a regular scallawag. Come, Bess, put up your lips, give me a kiss, and say that you'll be mine, though all the world goes against me."

And then he bent his head down to kiss the red lips of the girl, but that kiss he never took, for round the corner of the stable bounded two men, and in a twinkling Jim York was over on his back, struggling vainly in an iron grasp.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IN THE NET.

OVER and over on the ground rolled York and his unknown assailant. Although taken by surprise, York made a desperate resistance. It was of but little avail, for the arms that grasped him were arms of steel, yet supple as the bending willow.

Bessie at the moment of the sudden attack screamed at the top of her voice, and the result was that the stable was surrounded by a curious crowd almost instantly.

York was quickly overpowered, for the second assailant laid hold of his feet and bound them in a twinkling, and then helped his companion to bind York's arms.

Old Shook, who was one of the first to arrive upon the scene, was scarlet with rage when he beheld his daughter, evidently surprised in a secret meeting with the man she had promised to resign.

It was a strange picture, that little scene, after York had been secured.

By the captured man, bound hand and foot, and lying at full length upon the ground, stood his assailants, Dick Talbot and the Indian, Mud Turtle; Dick looking down upon the face of his ancient foe with a quiet smile of satisfaction, while the Indian stood like a statue, no expression whatever upon his features.

Bessie had begun to cry, and the tears were trickling down between her fingers as she hid her face in her hands.

The bystanders looked at each other in perfect astonishment. A fist-fight, or a quarrel wherein revolvers and bowie-knives played a conspicuous part, they could understand; the streets—or street, to speak more correctly—of Humbug Bar had witnessed many such a sight; but to see two men upon a third and neither beat, wound nor maim him in the least, only truss him up like a fowl ready for roasting, was really a novelty.

"What's broke? What's up, say?" questioned the crowd, one of the other. No wonder that the lookers-on were astonished, for wily, cool-eyed Talbot had disarmed York the moment he had bound him.

And Bessie weeping, and old Shook in a towering rage. It was not strange that, looking upon such a scene, the miners asked for an explanation.

"Oh, Bessie!" cried the old man, too angry to vent his rage in words.

"I couldn't help it, father!" the girl sobbed.

"Oh, you villain!" and Shook doubled up his fist and looked as if he was about to spring forward and take immediate vengeance on York, bound and helpless as he was.

"Don't blame the girl!" York cried, his usual coolness returning. "It was not her fault. She did not know that I was here when she came, and as for myself, maybe I wanted to say good-by. I'd like to

know, though, of you, stranger, what you mean by this work?" and York addressed his speech to Talbot. "Jumping on a man without giving him a chance to defend himself; two of you on one, too. Boys, do you call that giving a man a fair show?" he appealed to the crowd who were gathered around the entrance to the shed.

A murmur of disapprobation came from the throng.

"What's the trouble, anyway?" one asked, speaking for the rest, but before Talbot could reply, "Kangaroo" pushed his way through the crowd; he had been standing in the background, apparently waiting to see which way affairs were tending.

Kangaroo swaggered up to Talbot, his revolver drawn and in his hand, and his finger upon the hammer, ready to cock it.

"Look-a-hyer! we'll jist take a hand in this hyer game, and we want a fresh deal all round the board. Jist you let him up. I'm on the shoot now, I jist tell you."

"Oh, you are on the shoot, eh, Mr. Kangaroo Denton?" Talbot said, in his quiet way, and the revolver which he had taken from York he thrust into his belt. The manner of Injun Dick was extremely pleasant, his face calm and placid, yet there was a peculiar look about the eyes which belied the smile.

"Wal, that's my name, an' I don't go back on it," Denton said, boisterously; but it was plain that he was annoyed at being recognized.

"Do you wish to assist your friend over yonder?" Dick asked, smiling in such a manner that it irritated the gentle Denton most terribly.

"Wal, I do, an' I'm goin' to, too, now; you kin bet all your gold-dust on it!" Denton exclaimed. He really began to believe that he had succeeded in backing Dick down, but the quiet, supercilious smile annoyed him.

"Pass right on, sir, and assist him," Dick said, with extreme politeness, stepping to one side that the other might pass.

Denton hesitated for a moment; he was trying to think of some biting remark to hurl at his cool antagonist, but he was not quick-witted, and had to content himself with a muttered growl; then he advanced to the aid of York, over whose features a threatening expression had come that boded no good to his foe, Injun Dick.

Three steps Kangaroo took; three swaggering steps that told more plainly than words how great he felt his triumph to be, and then—a smothered cry from York; a long breath of wonder from the bystanders, and Mr. Denton felt a sensation under his right ear as if a stray mule had got into the stable and kicked him. Over he went into the arms of the Indian, and in a second, Kangaroo, bound hand and foot, was lying by the side of York. The blow, delivered straight as a die and with the quickness of the panther's spring by Dick's powerful arm, had knocked the bully completely out of time, and it was full five minutes before he recovered his senses.

A spontaneous burst of admiration came from the lips of the crowd. As one of the throng afterward remarked, it "was the puttiest, cleanest lick he ever see'd struck in Montana!"

And then, the sentiment of surprise over the crowd surged forward a step or so as if with intent to take a hand in the game, but, in his easy, quiet way, Dick waved them back with one hand, while he drew a revolver from his belt and cocked it with the other.

"Hold on, gentlemen!" he cried; "this is my funeral. I'm running this graveyard. This long-legged fellow here talked about two on one a minute ago and appealed to you for fair play. It didn't take two to lay him out. This isn't any common affair, gentlemen. I don't want to boast, but I think that any one of you, after what you have seen, would be perfectly willing to swear that I didn't want any backer in this fight if I had wished to kill either of these men."

"That's so!" cried one of the crowd, emphatically.

"Co-rect!" exclaimed a second.

Dick had made the impression that a cool and determined man usually produces upon a crowd.

"What's the matter, anyway?" inquired Shook, whose curiosity had gotten the better of his anger.

And the crowd re-echoed the old man's words.

"These men are guilty of both robbery and murder," replied Dick, quietly.

A hum of astonishment rose from the crowd, and with open mouths they looked at each other.

"Both these men are members of Rocky Mountain Rob's road-agents," Talbot continued.

"You lie!" cried York, fiercely, his face deathly pale.

The crowd were thoroughly astonished at the charge.

"Is that so?" exclaimed Shook, in wonder; and Bessie, taking advantage of the confusion amid the crowd, slipped from the stable and ran, with the swiftness of a fawn, into the house.

York alone noticed her departure, and a bitter curse came from his lips. Oh, how he prayed for a giant's strength to burst the bonds which confined him, that he might spring upon his foe, and with a single grasp, choke the very life from that sinewy frame he so cordially hated!

"It's a cursed lie, I tell you!" exclaimed York, writhing in the keen agonies of impotent rage, and grinding his teeth like a maddened hyena.

"I'll give you a chance to prove that before you're a day older," Talbot replied, with provoking coolness.

"You're all a set of cowards!" York cried, hot with rage. "Give me back my liberty and my arms, and I'll fight you, one and all—I will, by Heaven!"

"Tain't any use 'busing us," one of the miners remarked, tartly. "We hain't lifted a finger ag'in' ye. We don't know 'xactly how it was with you, seein' as how the sponge had bin throwed up for you afore we come, but as fur your friend thar, he were licked in fa'r fight."

"He struck him unawares!" York cried.

"The galoot ought to keep his eyes peeled arter he b'iled in," another miner remarked, tersely.

"This man lies when he says that I am one of the road-agents!" York exclaimed. "Is he going to be my judge?"

"No, siree!" cried Shook, emphatically.

"Give me a fair show, that's all I ask," York said, striving to appear calm. "Who'll try me, then?"

"Judge Lynch, old man!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE BUZZARDS' ALARM.

A sudden hush came upon the little throng. To call upon Judge Lynch was no every-day affair. His court was one where there was but little pleading, small scope for legal learning, little chance for the sportive tricks by means of which law blinds the eyes of justice, and the rogue goes unwhipped back into the world. Trial, judgment and execution followed fast each upon the other. No time for prayer, small opportunity for the doomed soul to settle up with earth and prepare for the journey to the unknown world, which is so great a mystery to both saint and sinner.

"Judge Lynch! Judge Lynch!" was passed around from mouth to mouth, and eyes grew earnest, and lips grew stern, as the savage but honest spirit of wild frontier-justice rose before them.

"Gents, I move that we adjourn to the squar' in front of the Waterproof saloon, an' talk this hyer affair over, an' call upon our fellow-citizens for their sentiments," said the miner who had replied to York.

It is a remarkable fact in the history of the wild West how deliberate and moderate is the forming of Judge Lynch's court, in strange contradiction to the breadth and quickness of its judgments.

"I second the motion," exclaimed Shook.

"Go in; all right," the crowd repeated, two or three speaking for the others.

"Say, you're prepared to sw'ar ag'in' these men?" the miner asked, turning to Talbot.

"Yes, sir; and got the evidence to back my words," Talbot replied.

"You lie, you cursed hound!" yelled York, almost beside himself with rage, "and you're all in with him. Give me my weapons, I say, and all I ask is a fair fight and no favor!"

"Look-a-hyer, young feller," the miner said, slowly and deliberately, "Judge Lynch has got to set on you; then, afterward, if this gent hyer can't prove what he says, you can fight your quarrel out in your own way."

"Who will be responsible for the prisoners?" asked Shook.

"I will," replied Talbot, promptly; "I'll take charge of them, and stand ready to produce them whenever the court desires."

"I reckon he will," one miner whispered to another, with a grin. There's nothing like success in this world to catch the crowd.

"Come, gents, let us adjourn."

And the crowd left the stable entrance and went round to the little square in front of the Waterproof.

By the time the crowd got round there, there were about twenty in the party, and the loungers in the street, attracted by the unusual number of people gathered in front of the hotel, came up one by one with intent to discover what had caused the crowd.

Pop Shook was proposed and accepted as chairman, and called the meeting to order.

The miners meant business, and now that they had got their hand in, thought that they might as well go the whole hog, as one of them aptly expressed it; and that they might do so, it was resolved that they send messengers to Get-up Gulch and Poor-shoot City to request them to send delegates to a meeting to be held that night in the square, at seven o'clock, to organize the Vigilance Committee, so that a general move might be made to "clean out" the bad characters from the Bar and suburbs.

The delegates were appointed and dispatched on their several missions.

Then the meeting adjourned to meet at six o'clock, in the bar-room of the Waterproof, to choose delegates to represent the general meeting.

Naturally, the tidings that the vigilantes were up flew with astonishing rapidity, and within five hours at most the news was known in every little gulch and mining-camp within twenty miles of the Bar.

To some the news came with terrible significance; 'twas like the black cloud gathering in the summer sky which tells of the lightning-flash and the thunderbolt.

Many a black sheep who won not his "dust" by manly wrestling with old Mother Earth under the sun's broad beams, but by trick of cunning fingers and juggling devices, after night's gloom had clouded the earth, became for the nonce "pilgrims." They waited only to be certain that the news was true, and then like Arabs of the far-off desert, "they silently folded their tents and stole away," seeking "fresh fields and pastures new," where Judge Lynch's iron hands reached not out its talons to clutch the blackleg and the thief.

Others of a bolder nature swore that they would not stir a peg; they would remain, face Judge Lynch and all his power. "It wasn't going to be much of a shower, anyway, and if need be, they would meet revolver with revolver, and bowie with bowie."

"Who's afeard?"

But the valley of the Wisdom had never seen such a storm gathering in its clear skies before. The vigilantes of Humbug Bar had yet to strike the evil-doer.

Great was the excitement at Get-up Gulch and Poor-shoot City. The mines were deserted, and the saloons did a smashing business.

The sentiment in favor of the committee was universal. The outrage at the Chinese Camp had startled the hardy miners from their dream of peace. Each one asked himself how long it would be before the outlaws would descend on his home, and rob him of his precious store of hard-earned gold-dust.

The gamblers and other vile characters who were wont to flaunt their gay plumes up and down the streets, had suddenly disappeared. Their absence was noted and remarked upon.

"I'll be durned ef things ain't purifyin' round hyer, already," Jim Turner remarked to the colonel, as they stood in the main street of the Gulch, after the meeting had nominated the delegates to the Bar and adjourned.

"The buzzards are going home to roost," the colonel said, tersely.

After Denton had recovered his senses, he looked about him in astonishment. The crowd were gathered in front of the stable; their conversation we have already detailed.

Denton looked at his hands and feet and then tried to rub his neck against his shoulder.

"Say, what the blazes was that hit me?" he asked.

"Talbot gave you a clip under the ear, you infernal fool," York replied.

"You hadn't ought to go fur to call a feller names as come to help you out!" Kangaroo said, indignantly.

"You cursed idiot, if you had used your revolver, and shot him down on the spot, we would have been all right," York said, bitterly.

"How could I tell that he was going to welt me like that?" Kangaroo demanded. "My head feels like a small-sized grist-mill. What did he hit me with?"

"With his fist, of course!" cried York, "and you feel like a log. He knocked what little sense you have out of you, and it's precious little you've got."

"Say, quit 'busing a feller," Kangaroo remonstrated. "I wish you'd got that lick. I swear I thought the hull durned shanty had caved in. I reckon it will be better 'fore long, though."

"I reckon so. When Judge Lynch puts the rope round our necks, it won't make much difference whether there's a lump under your ear or not."

"They can't prove anything," Denton said, nervously.

"Don't you be too sure of that," York replied.

Just at this time the crowd went away, and Talbot turned around and faced his prisoners.

"Come here, Talbot; I want to speak to you," York said. His tone was cold and quiet now.

Talbot came up to him.

"Send the Indian away; I want to speak to you privately."

The Indian did not wait to be told, but gathered his blanket around him, and stalked out to the entrance of the stable.

"Well?" said Talbot.

"What have you got against me?"

"Do you remember Barrel Camp, about a year ago?"

"Yes."

"You were very anxious to hang me then."

"Yes, I know it."

"It's my turn now."

Talbot's voice was quiet and cold, but there was the ring of steel in it that sounded like the knell of doom to the ears of the helpless men.

"Talbot, I'll give you your weight in gold!" York cried.

"Can you bring my dead wife from her grave by the Salmon river?" Talbot asked.

A half-groan came from York. He despaired.

CHAPTER XXXV.

HOW IT IS DONE.

With the going down of the sun the miners commenced to gather in the main street of the Bar. As a general rule the denizens of the Wisdom valley usually went armed, but on this occasion each separate miner was a regular walking arsenal; they all fairly bristled with weapons.

There was no boasting as to what would be done; only a few quiet remarks were exchanged as friend encountered friend.

"You're well 'heeled,' Jim," No. 1 would remark, with a smile at the formidable weapons of the other.

"Heerd thar' was wolves 'round," No. 2 would reply, and then, with a look at the armament of No. 1, would observe, "pears to me, Bill, that you are mighty brave troffin' 'round without any we'pons but a couple of revolvers and a shot-gun."

"I'm from ole Kaintuck, you know, an' we scar' b'ar to death thar by lookin' at 'em," would be the reply.

Then a couple of old "solid" men, relics, perhaps, of the "pilgrims" of '49, would run across each other in the crowd, and after a hearty grip of the hand, would exchange sentiments.

"The machine is started."

"Glad to see it; we'll put her through, too."

These men, with their bristling arms, their rough and soiled clothes, huge beards and boots, looking like a robber band preparing for a foray, had met together, called by the noblest attribute of humanity—Justice. In the sacred name of the blind god deth they had come to strike terror to the evil-doer; and to publish aloud to all the world that honest men alone were wanted in the Wisdom valley.

An impromptu platform had been constructed out of some old boxes in front of the Waterproof saloon, and at seven o'clock precisely a huge bonfire by the side of the platform was lighted; then old Pop Shook mounted the stand and called the meeting to order.

A hundred armed men at least were grouped about the platform. Not a mining-camp for twenty miles around but was represented.

The rise of a Vigilance Committee was not an every-day affair, and one and all wished to have a finger in the pie.

The rough, armed, reckless-looking crowd became as quiet as a prayer-meeting assembled in a village church when old Shook rattled the bottom of a bottle on a piece of board and called aloud for attention.

"Fellow-citizens, I rise to address you on this hyer occasion," Shook commenced. "I s'pose it's hardly necessary fur me to state what has convened us hyer together, but in order that we shall be sure we're right afore we go ahead, I'll state the causes which has brought together this hyer concourse of free American citizens, right hyer in front of the Waterproof saloon. Ever since the day when the first white man stuck his pick into the sile of this hyer valley, we hev been a peaceful and law-abiding community. We hain't had many disturbances fur to speak of; and when some Gentile who had flaxed his mules until he felt competent to flax his feller-critters, has come into town and cavorted round like a short-tailed bull in fly-time, a-wanting to scalp somebody, some good, quiet citizen has gone fur that 'pilgrim,' and 'put a head on him,' and then that has ended it."

Pop paused for breath, and the crowd signified their approval by a subdued noise, that sounded for all the world as if a great bee-hive had been upset.

"And when two of our citizens hev had a leetle difficulty together, as disputes will arise, my bretheren, you know, in the best regulated families, they hev, quietly and without disturbin' their neighbors, drawn their shootin'-irons and 'wiped' each other out, and then we have used the remains to start our graveyards with. But now, feller-citizens, things are changed. If a man wants a leetle amusement in the evening after a hard day's work, it ain't safe

fur him any longer to risk his money on the sportive 'eucher' or the exhilarating 'poker.' They'll ring in a cold deal every time!"

A little ripple of merriment from a knot of men close to the stand, comprising Bob Shook, Johnny Bird and others, reached the old man's ears just then. They had an idea that Shook "knew how it was himself" in regard to betting on sure things in the poker line.

Shook never took any notice of the "boys," but, after he got breath, went on again:

"We hev fallen into evil times, feller-citizens, and we must take measures to git out. We air a free and independent community, and so fur we hev got along without law or lawyers. In the last few months we hev had a great many disreputable characters come into the valley, but as fur as I know, we hain't had a single lawyer yit."

Solemn as was the occasion, and deep as were the feelings of the majority of the crowd, yet a laugh went round at Pop's declaration.

"And now the time has come when a change must come over the spirit of our dream; we must—as the Scriptur' says—'gird up our loins,' and go fur the galoots who hev gone fur us, red-hot! We don't want law; and we don't want lawyers; one ain't much, and the other ain't nuthing. But what we do want is Justice. We want to rise up in our might as honest men and free American citizens, and say to the scallywags ginerally, while we wave the shining blade of Justice over their heads, 'git up and git!'"

A subdued burst of applause came from the throng; eye glanced into eye, and head nodded to head, in taken of perfect accord.

Pop wiped the perspiration off his shining forehead and "went for 'em" again:

"I know where a robber lives—a disgrace to any civilized community, but I can't go before a judge and make a complaint against him, because we hain't got a judge. What are we then to do? Must we be robbed? must we submit to outrage from a band of outlaws? No! The free American heart that I feel hyer a-thumping ag'in my breast says No! and that leetle word is howled out as the thunder howls when it comes crashing through the tall pine and splits the top of the big white peak as if it was a rotten cheese. What remedy hev we, feller-citizens? We, that air up hyer in the mountains, shet out by them big hills over yonder from the hull civilized world? I'll tell yer, feller-citizens; it's the same remedy that the Scriptur' tells us of: 'Those that take the sword must perish by the sword!' 'Woe unto the world is the evil thereof, but woe unto them from whom the evil cometh!' To look after No. 1 is the fust law of natur'. When a wild beast tackles us in the gulch, we go fur him and we lay him out of we kin. We air going to take a step, feller-citizens, which has been forced upon us. That we may live in peace, we go to war. Sich is the contradiction of life. We can't dodge the issue. Shall honest men or rascals run the machine known as Wisdom valley? The question has got to be decided now. And we, my bretheren, met hyer together, with calmness on our brows, patience and justice in our hearts, and the carnal weapons of war indiscriminately scattered about our wearing apparel, must take this coyote by the tail and pull him clean out of his hole. Therefore, I call upon you, one and all, who want justice and nuthin' else, to jine with me in calling upon the Vigilantes to rise and purify this hyer neighborhood!"

"Get-up Gulch seconds the motion!" cried Jim Turner, the instant Shook had finished.

"Feller-citizens!" and a tall, lank miner was hoisted up on the shoulders of two others from a group some twenty paces from the stand. "Poor-shoot City goes twenty men armed and equipped as the law directs, for the Vigilantes, and moves that the vote be made unanimous!"

Then for the first time the miners opened their mouths freely, and yell after yell went up on the air.

The excitement was contagious. In a second, Jim Turner was hoisted up on the back of a brawny miner.

"Feller-citizens!" he yelled, as the crowd finished their shouting, "Get-up Gulch sees Poor-shoot City's twenty men and goes twelve men better!"

And then the men from the Gulch went their "level best" on a yell, and when they had finished, the "sharps" from the city took it up, and then the men of the Bar "jined" in.

When the excitement had subsided somewhat, Shook rapped violently with the bottle on the board to catch the attention of the crowd.

"Feller-citizens, the Vigilance Committee is formed!" the old man cried. "I move that an even number of delegates be appointed from Get-up Gulch, Poor-shoot City and Humbug Bar to meet in some suitable place and ballot for Judge Lynch and other officers of the court."

The motion was speedily seconded and carried; then, after a brief discussion, five delegates from each of the towns were appointed, and Johnny Bird was admitted as a delegate from the Geyser Spring district, whose forces had not yet reached the scene of action.

Then the sixteen adjourned to the dining-room of the Waterproof, while the crowd outside debated upon whom Judge Lynch's mantle would fall, and the probable fate of the two prisoners, York and Kangaroo.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A WOMAN'S NATURE.

At one end of the hotel was a little shanty used as a woodshed. It joined that part of the building where the kitchen was located, and a door led from the kitchen into the woodshed; then, another door led from the shed into the open air.

Talbot and the Indian had picked up their two prisoners, as if they had been two sacks of wheat, and had carried them into the woodshed.

As Talbot had shrewdly remarked, there was less danger of a rescue there.

When the darkness came, Dick sent for some candles, that he might not be left in the dark with his prisoners, whom he had placed at the further end of the woodshed, loosening the rope around their ankles so that they could sit up. Talbot and the Indian then had taken post at the two doors which were close together at the other end of the shed.

After York's vain attempt to bribe Dick to let him

escape, he had remained silent. Not that the wily and desperate man despaired. He had seen death much nearer, a dozen times in his life, and yet had escaped the icy touch.

For a moment, when Talbot's chilling tones had told him that he might expect no mercy, he had suffered despair to come upon him, but, it was for a second only, and then the bold, daring spirit, which so far in his life had carried him with flying colors through the world, came back to him and reasserted its wonted power.

"There's many a slip between the cup and lip," he murmured, between his clenched teeth. "Why should not I hope to escape, when I have faced dangers more terrible than this one, and yet lived to tell and laugh about them?"

The darkness, too, brought hope to York's mind. The night was before him, and before morning came, much might happen.

About six, Talbot sent the Indian into the hotel and had some supper brought out for his prisoners.

"I don't intend to starve you," he said, as the Chinaman placed the victuals before the two. York took no notice of the remark, while Kangaroo indulged in a sullen growl. But Kangaroo eat heartily of the food, though York did not; he felt that a morsel would have choked him.

Talbot had loosened the cords which bound the arms of the two prisoners that they might eat, but ten paces from them he stood, a cocked revolver in his hand, determined not to give them a possible chance of escape.

When Talbot gave the order for the supper and the Indian departed, then returned, and announced that old Shook had said that it would be sent in as soon as it could be got ready, he noticed that a quick flash of hope passed across York's face. Talbot easily guessed what produced it. York expected that the girl Bessie would bring in the supper. He hoped to be able to speak a few words to her, but when the Celestial appeared in her place, York's face clouded once again.

Dick laughed quietly to himself.

"Aha, my bird!" he muttered, "neither man's strength nor woman's witchery will get you out of this trap, I reckon. I sha'n't lose sight of you until the hangman puts his noose around your neck, and if by any trick you should chance to escape from the Vigilantes, then in the mountain gulch you'll meet your fate." And as Talbot spoke, his fingers clenched tightly around the butt of the revolver in a manner which boded no good to Jim York, if the possessor of the pistol got a chance to use it on him.

Then there came a low tap at the door which led into the hotel. Talbot, thinking that it was the Chinaman after the dishes, bade him "come in;" but the invitation was not accepted. Then Dick thought that his ears had deceived him, but then there came a second low tap, so he walked to the door and opened it. To his astonishment he discovered Bessie Shook. The kitchen in which the girl stood was quite light, so that he could see her face quite plainly. The eyes of the girl showed that she had been crying.

"I want to speak with you a moment, sir," she said, slowly, and evidently greatly embarrassed. And, as he opened the door, she got to one side of it so that the prisoners in the shed could not distinguish who it was.

"With me?" Talbot asked, a little astonished.

"Yes, if you please, sir, and please come in here so that they can't see you," she said, imploringly.

Talbot took a good look at the girl. Naturally suspicious, the thought came to him that it was only a ruse to get him out of the shed so that an attempt could be made to rescue the prisoners. But he saw no guile in the face before him, only evidence of distress. There could be but little danger in complying with her request.

"I will come in a moment," he said. Then he closed the door and went to the Indian.

"I want to go in the other room for a minute," he whispered in the Indian's ear. "How's your revolver—sure fire?"

"He fire—you bet!" the chief replied.

"Take it from your belt and keep it in your hand ready for action," Injun Dick commanded.

Talbot then examined the door leading into the open air. It opened outwardly and was fastened by a stout bolt. Satisfied that the prisoners were safe, he went into the kitchen; he did not close the door behind him, but left it ajar; so that, in a second, in case of alarm, he could be in the shed again.

Just as Talbot entered the room, the first yell of the miners, engaged in the meeting outside, burst on the air.

The girl shuddered as she listened to the sound. Talbot guessed what was going on in the square.

"Do you know what they are doing outside, sir?" she asked.

"I think that I can guess without any trouble," he replied. "The citizens are forming a Vigilance Committee."

"Yes, that is what I heard them say," she said, hurriedly and nervously. "And what will they be likely to do with those two men in there?" and she pointed to the shed where the prisoners were confined.

Dick hesitated for a moment; he knew the truth would be painful.

"Oh, speak, sir; tell me right out!" the girl cried, imploringly.

"If they find them guilty, they will either order them to leave town, or—"

"Hang them!" the girl exclaimed. She had lived long enough in the mountains to know something of the ways of the mountain men.

Talbot inclined his head in the affirmative.

"Oh! one of them must not be hung—Mr. York—Jim York!" she cried. "You can let him go; here's all the money and jewelry that I've got in the world; take it, and let him go," and the girl attempted to put a little buck-skin bag into Talbot's hand.

The stern face of the man-hunter softened, and his eyes grew moist, as he looked into the sorrowful face of the girl.

"And do you love this man so much?" he asked, slowly.

"No, no; it is not that," she replied. "I thought that I loved him once, but now I know that I don't; but it's all my fault. If it hadn't been for me, he wouldn't have come here. Oh, dear! oh, dear! I'll

never flirt with any one again as long as I live! Oh! oh!" and the girl burst into a passionate flood of tears.

"Miss Bessie," and Talbot put the little bag back into her hand; "if I could let the man go, it would be your tears, and not your gold-dust or jewelry, that would buy his freedom; but he is doomed. You don't know the man you're pleading for. He has blood enough on his soul to sink a dozen men down to fires eternal. His death was sworn long before you ever saw him. 'Tis not your fault. I am answerable for this man to the men yonder in the square, and even if I were free to let him go without any one having the right to say, 'Why do you so?' a mountain of solid gold would not buy his worthless life?"

And then the door closed behind Dick, and Bessie fled up-stairs to her little chamber, and burying her head in the bed-clothes, tried to sob her sorrow away.

While the conversation between the two had been going on, Kangaroo and the Indian had indulged in an exchange of sentiments.

"Good Injun," said Kangaroo, beamingly, "let white man out, white man give his red brother plenty rum—lots of gold-dust. Injun can get drunk for a month. How's that, eh?"

"Injun get drunk—he sick heap," replied the savage, with dignity. "He want see white brother pull rope from tree—nice."

Kangaroo shivered; he understood the allusion.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

LYNCH COURT.

In the dining-room of the Waterproof, the sixteen delegates assembled. The delegations comprised the best men of the three districts.

"Now, gentlemen, let's arrange the programme," Shook proposed.

"Wal, we want to elect Judge Lynch—and what other officers do we want?" said one of the delegates from Poor-shoot City.

"Judge Lynch, a sheriff and deputy to execute the prisoners found guilty, I should say," the colonel remarked; he was one of the "Gulch" delegates.

"Then, colonel, in case the roughs show fight, we might need officers to head the men—captains of police like," old Shook suggested.

"That is not a bad idea," Jacks remarked, thoughtfully. "How many fighting-men can we count for police?"

After a discussion, the delegates came to the conclusion that about a hundred men could be relied on.

"Well, then, suppose we divide the hundred into four companies, twenty-five men in each company; one captain and twenty-four privates. Then we have the judge, the sheriff and deputy, as colonel, lieutenant-colonel and major, thus forming a compact military organization on the same principle as a regiment."

"I think that the colonel has got it down fine," Turner said, "and I move that we adopt the good old two-thirds rule as a startin'-p'int."

Turner's motion was unanimously adopted. "And now, fellow-citizens, as time is quick and life is short, let's perceed to 'lect Judge Lynch!" Turner exclaimed.

"Go ahead; make your nominations and we'll act onto 'em," Shook declared.

All the available chairs and benches had been brought into the room, and the delegates had thus been provided with seats. Shook, as chairman, had taken possession of the table.

The Jew store-keeper, a delegate from the Bar, was the first to get on his legs.

"Shentlemens, I propose mine honored friend, Mister Shook, for Shudge Lynch."

Then he sat down, and Turner jumped up.

"I nominate Colonel Jacks for Judge Lynch."

And then a delegate from the City took the floor, and proposed Teddy Murphy—the Murphy of Murphy's Strike, after Chinese Camp, and who was now running a mine at the "City."

Then there was a pause.

"Nominations all made, gents?" Shook inquired.

No one spoke; then Shook proceeded:

"We will now proceed to ballot for choice, and, as the simplest way is allers the best, let the gents as made the original nominations repeat them one by one, and then those in favor of the candidates rise."

"Co-rect!" ejaculated Turner. "Pile in, boys."

"Shentlemens, I propose Mister Shook for Shudge Lynch," said Moses, rising; but before any one else could get upon their feet, Shook claimed the hearing of the members.

"Fellow-citizens, while I feel honored by the nomination of my respected friend hyer, Mr. Moses, I must decline to run. I ain't the man you want. I kin run a hotel; I don't take a back seat thar, fur any man in these hyer Rocky Mountains; but Judge Lynch ain't my best holt. I retire in favor of my friend, Colonel Jacks, and—without meaning any disrespect to Mister Murphy, whom I esteem as a gentleman and a judge of good whisky—(side remark from Murphy in regard to "laying it on too thick")—I think that the colonel will fill the bill for Judge Lynch. He has seen service on fields whar blood run like water, my bretheren. (Shook would get into the camp-meeting style.) He has been thar and lived fur to come back and tell onto it. He kin sarve you equally in the council-chamber and on the gory field of war, and I go fur him every time."

Then Shook sat down amid a general murmur of applause, his fat face glowing like a furnace.

Murphy was on his feet in an instant; he was a rather undersized Irishman, with curling yellow hair and beard, and a bright blue eye.

"Gintlemen, since I'm called to the fore, ag'in my will," he cried, in a rich brogue that told of the south of Ireland, "bedad, I rise to explain. I'm not the man for Judge Lynch, aither. If I had my way, I'd be after hanging the blaggards fust an' thin tryin' them afterward! I resign in favor of the kurnel, and I move that we make his nomination unanimous, begorra!"

"I second the motion!" cried Turner.

And then the rest of the delegates got up and expressed their sentiments by a few vociferous yells.

Pop Shook rapped for order, and when the excitement subsided, announced that Colonel Jacks was duly elected Judge Lynch.

Then the election proceeded for sheriff and deputy.

Old Shook and Turner were proposed and elected

without a dissenting voice. The four captains were also chosen, and then the colonel, taking possession of a chair and placing it behind the table which Shook had occupied, announced that the court was ready for business.

"How shall we proceed, colonel, in regard to the indictments?"

"The shortest way is the best," the colonel replied. "Let the captains go outside and organize their companies; then have one of the captains detail ten men as police for the court. Announce to the citizens in general that the court is open to receive complaints, and request that any one knowing of any bad characters harboring in the valley, at once give information regarding the aforesaid."

Shook and Turner proceeded to carry out the Judge's orders. And while the captains were organizing their forces, the miners, one by one, who had complaints to make, filed into the presence of the colonel, and he made a written note of their statements.

It took about twenty minutes to form the companies, and at the end of that time, Shook and Turner returned with a *posse* of ten men.

The Judge had finished his memorandum, and rapping sharply on the table, announced that the court would now proceed to business.

"Summon Doc Kidder, accused by Lem Hase of being a gambler and a person of bad character, without visible means of support," the Judge read from the notes.

There was a general exclamation of surprise at this accusation, for Kidder was well known and generally liked, while his accuser was newly come to the Bar, and had already distinguished himself by getting into several quarrels, in most of which he had come out second best.

"Hold on, Judge!" cried Kidder, who was looking into the room through one of the open windows; "I'm on hand; no need to send for me," and then Kidder got in through the window.

"Sheriff, arrest Mr. Kidder, and Lem Hase step forward," the Judge said.

Shook laid his hand on Kidder's shoulder, while Hase came forward very unwillingly from amid the crowd. He had not anticipated being brought face to face with the man he had accused.

"Now, Mr. Kidder, what have you to say in answer to the charge brought against you?" the colonel asked.

"That it is false in every particular, and I defy him to prove it," Kidder said, coolly.

"State your case, sir!" the Judge said, abruptly, turning to Hase.

This was not at all what that gentleman had expected, and he was evidently embarrassed at being thus publicly brought forward.

"Come, come, go on, sir; we've no time to waste!" the colonel cried, impatiently, finding that the witness hesitated.

"Wal, everybody knows that he's a gambler, an'—"

"Hold on, sir!" cried the Judge, interrupting him; "we don't want to know what everybody knows; we want to know what *you* know."

The crowd tittered, and Hase "got mad." "He cheated me outen ten ounces t'other night at poker!" Hase exclaimed, with a savage look at the snickering crowd.

"What is your defense, Mr. Kidder?"

"He bantered me into playing, then lost his money, and I defy him to prove that I cheated him in any way. It was a perfectly fair game."

"That's so; I see'd it, Judge!" Johnny Bird exclaimed, and two or three others in the crowd volunteered the same testimony.

"We hold the charge not proven," the colonel said, "and we want everybody to understand we don't sit here to listen to paltry complaints from men who gamble and lose their money, then whine because they didn't win. Now, Mr. Kidder, what do you say to the second count—a gambler, without visible means of support?"

"A lie, Judge," answered Kidder. "I own ten shares in the Get-up Gulch Gold Mining Company, ten shares in the Red Bear Mine, and one-half of the Waterproof saloon, besides shares in six or seven mines up at the City. I can prove by Pop Shook here that my monthly income is enough to support a man in good style without his having to do a stroke of work."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

YORK AT BAY.

The colonel turned to Shook.

"Is this statement correct?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the old man, emphatically.

"Judge, it isn't for me to set myself up as being any better than I am," Kidder said, in his cool, quiet way. "I own that I play cards, and for money, too, but I do it to amuse myself; and I really reckon if this here committee undertakes to clean out every man who fingers the 'papers' once in a while, land will be cheap in the valley and men will be 'skeerce.' I don't want to boast, but I generally calculate to play a square game when I'm playing with square men, and, if a 'sharp' from below undertakes to 'skin' me and gets flaxed himself, I don't exactly see how the community at large will suffer by the operation. I never yet took a man's last dollar, and I defy any man in the valley to come forward and point to any act of my life since I've been here—and that's nigh onto two years—that any good citizen has a right to complain of."

"That's so, squire!" shouted a tow-headed youth, who had but lately arrived at the Bar. "He won ten dollars an' bu'st me last night, an' guv it back. He sed that I mought be blazes on dominoes, but that I couldn't play poker worth a cent."

A general guffaw went round the room at this honest confession. And Hase took advantage of the confusion to slink quietly out of the room.

"Charges not proven. You are free, Mr. Kidder," the colonel said.

"Thank you; much obliged, Judge," and Kidder retired to the crowd.

Then the Judge referred to the list. He called Shook to him, and the two held a consultation. It was in reference to a low den called the "Cosmopolitan," kept by a man known as "Black Joe."

Then Shook dispatched Turner and a posse of twenty-five men to arrest the inmates of the saloon.

"They may show fight, but bring 'em, Jim," was Shook's parting injunction.

"You bet!" Turner said, tersely, as, with his squad, he departed immediately.

Fully two-thirds of the crowd followed the party, for Black Joe and his gang were known to be desperate men, and a fight was anticipated.

Then York and Kangaroo were brought into court by Talbot and the Indian.

The cords around the ankles of the prisoners had been removed, so that they could walk, but their arms were still bound.

As York entered the room, he caught sight of some one in the crowd. The colonel's quick eyes noticed the glance of intelligence that had been exchanged.

"Now, what charge?" he said, briefly.

Talbot stepped forward.

"I accuse these two men, York and Denton, alias Kangaroo, with being members of Rocky Mountain Rob's band of road-agents, and with being concerned in the destruction of the Chinese Camp."

The crowd were considerably astonished at this accusation. Neither York or Denton had borne the best of characters, but few imagined them to be anything worse than card-sharps.

"What have you to say in regard to this charge?" the colonel asked.

"It's an infernal lie!" York answered, promptly. "This fellow and the Indian will swear to anything against me. Both of 'em bear me a grudge because, about a year ago, I was on a Vigilance Committee that ordered them to leave town. That was down at Barrel Camp, on the Salmon river. This man, Talbot, swore that he would get even with me, and that's the reason that he's trumped up this charge against me, and, as for the Indian, he's a worthless, drunken thief, who will swear to anything for a bottle of whisky."

"Me good Injun," said the savage, with an air of scornful dignity.

"Mr. York, it don't matter much in this court what any one asserts. We sit here to learn the truth, and we're going to make every man back up what he says with proof. You are going to have a fair trial, if you are innocent of this charge, you need be under no alarm, but, if you are guilty, may Heaven have mercy on your soul, for I'll hang you to the nearest tree to the house that there is in the valley," the Judge said, with stern determination.

"Go ahead, Judge," York said; "I defy any of them to prove that I'm one of the road-agents, or that I had anything to do with the Chinese Camp affair. Things have come to a nice state 'round here when a decent white man can be seized and deprived of his liberty on the evidence of a lying, drunken Indian."

"The Indian has not made any charge against you yet," the colonel said, shortly. "Your accuser is a white man like yourself."

"I'm going to offer the Indian as a witness, though, Judge," Talbot said.

"That is quite correct, sir," the colonel replied. "This court is perfectly competent to decide whether his testimony is reliable or not."

"That's against all law!" York cried.

"Judge, if it is not against the rules of this court, I should like to appear as counsel for the prisoner," said a little, dapper fellow, with a shrewd, evil-looking face, stepping out from amid the crowd.

The man was a stranger to the men of the Bar, and they surveyed him with considerable astonishment.

"Counsel for the prisoner, eh?" the Judge queried, as a contemptuous expression flitted over his face.

"Yes, sir; I am a lawyer by profession, and I don't want to stand quietly by and see a man's life sworn away if my legal knowledge can prevent it."

"You'll find, sir, that *legal* knowledge ain't worth much in this court," the colonel said, sharply. He had all the military contempt for the exponents of the law.

"You're going to give a feller a chance for his life, ain't yer?" Kangaroo exclaimed, sulkily.

"You're going to get justice here, my friend, as you'll find out before you're two hours older," the colonel answered. "And now, Indian, stand forward and tell your story."

Mud Turtle's evidence was very strong and direct. He testified that, on the night of the destruction of the Chinese Camp, he, in company with Talbot, had left the Chinese shanty, tracking York, Kangaroo, and the miner known as Rackensack; that he had followed one of the three, whom he afterward discovered to be Rackensack; had tracked him down to his shanty on the outskirts of the Bar, then followed him back to the Chinese Camp, watched him put a black mask on his face and join the outlaws in their attack on the Celestials. And, after the attack, he had followed the outlaws to their mountain home, and on the way thither had seen one of the masked men remove the covering from his face, and recognized Jim York.

The Indian told his story very plainly, despite his broken English, and there was hardly one of the listeners who was not fully convinced that the savage had spoken the truth.

Then the lawyer went to work to break down the evidence of the chief.

"Were you perfectly sober last night?" asked the lawyer, fiercely, attempting to browbeat the savage.

The chief looked at the questioner from head to foot, uttered a guttural "ugh!" but made no other reply.

The lawyer became furious.

"I appeal to you, Judge, to make this fellow answer my question!" he cried.

"Mr. Lawyer, I really am at a loss to know what your question has to do with this case," the colonel observed.

"I want to show that this man was drunk and not able to identify anybody," protested the lawyer, angrily. "His evidence wouldn't be received in any court of justice."

"This court will receive it," the colonel said, grimly, "and if York can't disprove it, it will hang him as sure as I sit here."

"I've got another witness, Judge," Talbot, now called out.

"Let him step forward."

Then, in obedience to a signal from Talbot a Chinaman came from the crowd in the doorway. The miners who had patronized the *monte*-bank recognized him at once. It was the assistant of the dealer.

He testified that he had heard York speak and by his voice recognized him as one of the masked men who had attacked the Chinese Camp the night before.

York smiled contemptuously as the Celestial delivered his evidence.

"I protest against this testimony," yelled the lawyer, indignantly. "Is the life of a white man to be sworn away by an Indian and a Chinaman? And I protest, too, against this hyer hull proceeding. You've no right to try Mister York. You're no court at all!"

"Seize that fellow!" cried the colonel.

And in a second the lawyer was struggling in the grasp of two stalwart miners.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MORE EVIDENCE.

VAINLY the lawyer struggled in the miners' grasp. "Take him out and duck him in the river. We'll show him whether we're a court or not," the colonel said, with a grim sort of humor, which tickled the fancy of the miners.

And out into the open air and down into the Wisdom went the lawyer, despite his threats and prayers.

He emerged from the water on the other bank and took to his heels, and ran as if he expected an instant pursuit.

Anxious to keep up the joke, the miners sent half a dozen shots after him, which served to increase his speed. Then they returned to the court-room.

Talbot gave his evidence, which was simply a recital of his adventures the previous night, tracking York and Kangaroo to the cave of the outlaws, and then following the band of masked robbers on their raid on the Chinese Camp.

"What does all this prove?" cried York, indignantly, when Talbot had finished. York had listened with ill-suppressed passion to Dick's words. "Judge, I claim a fair trial. I want the clear white thing. I don't want to be hung on the word of a brute Indian and a heathen Chinese. This man, Talbot, can't prove anything against me. He says that he saw me go out of the Chinaman's shanty; that Kangaroo, here, and Rackensack were with me, and then, that he came out, saw us talking on the other side of the way, and then followed Kangaroo and myself to the mountains. How can he tell *who* he followed? He don't dare to say that he recognized either of us in the darkness," and York turned and faced Talbot defiantly as he spoke.

"Judge, I know that the two men I followed were these two, because the Indian followed the other man, and he turned out to be Rackensack," Talbot said.

"Mighty good evidence that is to hang a man on!" York cried, sarcastically. "He knew that I was one of the men that he followed because the *other* man, whom he didn't follow, and whom he didn't know any thing about except what the lying Indian says, was Bill Rackensack. You see, Judge, it all comes right down to what that Indian says. He's the framework of the whole shanty. Tumble his evidence down, and what is there left? It's just as plain as the sun at noonday! This man, Talbot, has got a grudge against me; so has the Indian, and they've trumped up this charge between them so as to get even with me. They didn't dare, either one of them, to give me a fair show for a fight like a man. No, they're afraid to do that; but they come behind my back and strike me with an accusation like this. They're just using you, Judge."

The colonel listened attentively and made no effort to interrupt York, but, after he had finished, thus spoke:

"York, you have used a good many words, but you haven't given us much evidence. Disprove the charges that these men make against you. The evidence against you is strong. It wouldn't amount to much, perhaps, in a court of *law*, but it does in this court, because we're after justice. We don't bind any legal cobwebs over our eyes, and then think that we can see clearer and that the aforesaid cobwebs strain truth from falsehood. We're going to give military justice—short, sharp and decisive. It's the hand of iron, and we don't hide it under a kid glove. Now, I'll give you a chance to disprove the evidence, and if you can't, you're a gone man. First, two witnesses swear that you were in the Chinese shanty on the night of the outrage, and that there were two other men with you; that they followed the three of you from the shanty; then you separated. The Indian says he then followed your companion, the man called Rackensack. Talbot says he followed the other two and tracked them to the road-agents' cave in the mountains. Now, if there was three of you together, and the Indian swears that the one he followed was Rackensack, the inference is tolerably clear that the other two were yourself and your present companion. The Chinaman swears that he recognizes you by your voice to be one of the disguised men who attacked his shanty. Now, upset these statements if you can."

"Judge, you're ruling pretty strong against me by implication if not right out in words," York said, doggedly.

"Go on with your proof; you're going to have justice!" the colonel commanded, sharply.

"Well, now, just listen to a plain, straightforward story," York said, and there was a look in his eyes like that in the eyes of the elk at bay surrounded by a hundred raging foes. "I was in the Chinese shanty last night. I lost five ounces at *monte*, and then drew out. Myself, Kangaroo and Rackensack were together. We left the shanty together, but parted on the outside. Kangaroo and I came straight down to the Bar. Now, Judge, you can see for yourself how easy it was for this man, Talbot, to be deceived. He came outside the shanty and saw three. The Indian says he followed one of them, and it turned out to be Rackensack. You see, Judge, how my simple explanation upsets the whole of the evidence of this Talbot as to following me to the robbers' den."

The colonel fixed his cold, gray eyes earnestly on the face of the prisoner.

"You were not one of the three men standing, conversing together, outside the Chinese shanty?" he said.

"No, sir," York answered, promptly; "we bid Rackensack good-night at the door and took the trail down the river at once. It was not very light, Judge, if you remember; the moon was not out

strong until about twelve. Why, you couldn't tell a man to know him thirty feet away."

"How far were the three men from you?" the colonel asked, addressing Talbot.

"From forty to sixty feet, I should judge," Talbot replied.

"You see, Judge!" exclaimed York, triumphantly; then he turned to Talbot. "Now, I ask you, on your word as a white man, did you recognize me last night as being one of the three men—that is, would you have taken any one of the three men standing talking together to be me if you had not expected that I was one of the three?"

All the crowd moved a step nearer to hear Talbot's answer, and a deathly stillness came upon Judge Lynch's court.

"No, I should not have taken any one of the three to be you. I did not recognize you. The darkness was so great that it was utterly impossible to recognize any one at the distance," Talbot answered, clearly.

A long breath of relief came from the crowd, and even hunted-down Jim York seemed to breathe easier. His prospects were brightening.

And, as for the colonel, he was watching Talbot's face intently, and he evidently saw something there which amused him, for the corners of the old soldier's mouth were drawn down in an old fashion and a peculiar look was in his eyes.

"Now, Judge, I'll put another question to him," and York again faced Talbot. "You say you tracked the two men from the Chinese Camp into the mountains?"

Talbot nodded.

"Can you swear positively that I was one of these men—that is, did you see my face or recognize me by my walk or dress?"

"No!"

Talbot was as quiet and unconcerned as if he was not aware that his words were striking off the manacles which his own hand had cast around his foe.

"Judge, I think that I have fully satisfied you that this man cannot swear of his own knowledge that I had anything to do with the Chinese Camp affair, or with the road-agents, either, for that matter. And now, Judge, just order the Chinaman to come forward, and I'll show you what his evidence amounts to."

Shook brought the Celestial forward. He came very unwillingly. His experience with the Melican man had not been particularly pleasant, and had led him to look upon the whole white race as foes and oppressors.

York fixed his cold, glittering eyes full upon the face of the Chinese.

"Can you tell the truth, John?" he asked.

"Me think me can—allee time," the Celestial replied, evidently ill at ease.

"You say that you think that I was one of the men with black masks who burned your shanty up last night—you think so by my voice. Now, what did you hear me say last night?" And, as York put the question, he advanced a step toward the man.

The miners also stepped forward, anxious to hear, and the Celestial, seeing the bearded and armed men coming closer to him, began to think that they meditated an attack upon him and that he had fallen into a trap.

"Me don' know—me not sure—me no think you bad 'Melican man allee time."

Now here was a clear back down. York turned to the colonel in triumph.

"What's his evidence worth?" he cried, exultingly. "You see how it is, colonel; I've smashed the whole thing. It was a put-up job from first to last, and that man is at the bottom of it," and he pointed to Talbot, threateningly. "He has hired the Indian to swear my life away so that he could get square with me. I can prove by Kangaroo here, that we left Rackensack the moment we got out of the shanty, and came straight to the Bar. Of course I'm not accountable for what Rackensack does. He may be one of the road-agents for all I know, but I'm innocent. Why don't he bring forward Rackensack? He can prove that I speak the truth."

"Rackensack is here, and he says you lie," Talbot said.

There was a sensation in court as Rackensack advanced.

CHAPTER XL.

JUDGMENT.

RACKENSACK had been standing back among the crowd in the doorway. It was evident that he had been waiting for Talbot's signal.

York turned deathly pale as his eyes fell upon the bloated face of his former companion. He fully realized that he was lost. Terrible was the look of hate with which he glared upon Talbot. He saw how cruel was the vengeance of Injun Dick. He had been played with as the cat plays with the mouse, and, though freedom had seemed close at hand, as one by one his wit had removed the obstacles between him and liberty, yet he had not bettered his position in the least, and was still in deadly peril.

The sudden appearance of the witness had not surprised the Judge in the least. He had guessed from Talbot's manner that he had some proof in reserve.

Rackensack leered insolently at York as he came forward. The look told the prisoner that he had been betrayed. The great muscles in York's frame rose and fell, and his anger made him for the moment almost insane with passion. Had York's arms been free, Rackensack would never have opened his lips to denounce his master, for York would have strangled him on the spot.

"You appear as a witness in this case?" the Judge asked, looking with his searching eyes into the face of the burly ruffian.

"Wal, I reckon I do," Rackensack replied, with a chuckle; "but, Judge, thar's a leetle matter I want understood afore I go ahead."

"Judge, I have promised this man that if he would turn State's evidence and tell all he knows regarding the road-agents, he should go free. I suppose the court will be willing to abide by that agreement," Talbot remarked.

"I suppose that it would be difficult to prove the guilt of the prisoners beyond a doubt in any other way," the Judge rejoined.

"Almost impossible, Judge," Talbot added. "They have covered up their tracks so well that only the evidence of one of the gang will convict them."

"The court agrees to the bargain then. Tell us

all you know about these two men and you shall go free," the colonel declared, decisively.

"Now you hit me whar I live!" the ruffian exclaimed, with a wink at York, who was glaring at him with eyes full of rage. "Now, furst and foremost, I'm one of the road-agents."

"Belonging to the band of Rocky Mountain Rob?" the colonel asked.

"Yes, siree," Rackensack replied.

"And where is Rob?" the Judge questioned. "Can you tell where he is to be found?"

"I'll bet yer I kin," the ruffian answered, confidently.

"Go ahead."

"Thar he is!"

And Rackensack pointed to York.

A murmur of astonishment came from all within hearing except Talbot and the Indian.

Even the colonel, sitting in judgment, was astonished. He could hardly believe it possible that, at the first scoop of the net, the Vigilantes had caught the dreaded outlaw chief.

"That man, Jim York, is Rocky Mountain Rob?" the colonel demanded, in amazement.

"That's so, or I'm a liar!" Rackensack exclaimed. York was white with rage.

"Judge, that fellow is brought to swear my life away!" he cried, hoarse with passion. "What reliance can you put on the word of a self-confessed villain such as he is? To save himself he would sacrifice me. You cowardly hound. If I had my hands free, I'd choke the life out of you."

"Mebbe you would, an' mebbe you wouldn't!" Rackensack retorted, defiantly. "I reckon that Judge Lynch's rope will choke you afore you git a chance to choke anybody."

"You declare this man to be the road-agent chief?" the colonel asked.

"You bet!" Rackensack replied, decidedly, "and Kangaroo thar is one of 'em, too. I was an honest man afore I run foul of them galoots, but they 'sued me into j'ining 'em, but my conscience is a-getting tender, an' I can't travel with them 'pilgrims' no longer, so I makes a clean breast of it."

The outlaw intended this speech to be of an affecting nature, and was naturally indignant, when some of the miners snickered at the idea of his having such a thing as a conscience; and Rackensack scowled at the crowd, at which they only laughed the more.

"I say that the fellow lies!" cried York. His face was white, and the big veins were standing out like knotted cords upon his temples. It was evident that he fully realized his peril. "To save his own worthless carcass he'd swear anybody's life away. Judge, are you going to convict me on the word of a scoundrel like that?"

"See here, York, it seems to me that you're a difficult man to suit," the colonel answered. "You object to the Indian's evidence because he's a savage, and to the Chinaman's because he's a heathen. You call for a white man's evidence. We give you a white witness and now you ain't satisfied. York, you're guilty, and all your twisting and turning won't save you."

"An' ef you ain't satisfied, Jedge, jist s'arch him!" Rackensack exclaimed. "You'll find one of the buck-skin bags that the Chinamen had their gold-dust in on him. I see'd him with the bag in his pocket this morning."

York's breath came thick and fast; already he felt the death-choke tightening around his neck.

From the pocket of York's coat Talbot drew a yellow buck-skin bag, which the Chinaman quickly identified as being one of the bags stolen from him by the masked ruffians the night before, at the Chinese Camp; and, to still further strengthen the chain of guilt, Moses, the Jew storekeeper, testified that the bag was one of a half dozen that he had sold to the Chinaman.

Vainly, like a hunted beast, York sought for some avenue of escape. The evidence against him was too strong to be broken down. Oh! how bitterly he cursed the folly which led him to the Bar! The foolish passion for the girl, Bessie, had blinded his better judgment and given him, like Sampson of old, helpless into the hands of his enemies. A woman's face had betrayed him to death.

"The evidence is conclusive," the colonel pronounced, coldly. "Have you anything to say, James York, why sentence of death should not be passed upon you?"

With a last desperate effort, York strove to avert the fearful doom that was so near.

"Again I say that I am the victim of a foul conspiracy. This man, Talbot, has sworn my death. He was afraid to meet me in a fair and open fight, man to man, but has contrived this plot so that other hands can take the life that he dares not attack. The Indian and this paltry coward both have been bought to lie against me. As for the buck-skin bag being found in my pocket, I have been a helpless prisoner in the hands of this man, Talbot, for at least three hours. How easy it would be for him to slip the bag into my pocket. It's all a lie, and if you hang me, I'm a murdered man."

"Judge!" cried Talbot, quickly and sharply, "I take it that you are going to hang this man. I ask a favor. He said that I am afraid to meet him. Now, just give us a revolver apiece, and let us out loose in the street. If he escapes, you hang me in his place."

"Suppose he kills you, what then?" the colonel asked.

"Injun willin' to be hung," said the chief, grimly. It was evident that the savage had little doubt as to the issue of the conflict.

"It can not be," the colonel replied, shortly. "James York, you are duly convicted of being Rocky Mountain Rob, the road-agent, and Kangaroo with being a member of his band, and the sentence of this court is that in half an hour's time you be hung from the nearest tree until you are dead, and may God have mercy on your guilty souls."

CHAPTER XLI.

A FRESH DEAL.

THE prisoners were conveyed back to the shed where they had previously been confined. They were now in the charge of Shook, who delegated five of the police of the court to guard them while the gallows was being prepared.

Rackensack disappeared the moment York's case had been concluded. He knew that, after betraying his chief, he was in danger, for the road-agents

would be upon his track as soon as his treachery was discovered.

The lynch court proceeded with the other cases before it.

Talbot and the Indian were outside the Waterproof saloon. After York's conviction, Talbot had no further interest in the lynch trial. The two walked slowly down the street, following in the footsteps of Shook and his squad who were on their way to the nearest tree to prepare the gallows.

The little street was almost deserted, for all the inhabitants who had not gathered at the lynch court, had gone off with Jim Turner and his posse to witness the anticipated fight with Black Joe's gang.

"I wish the Judge had let York and myself settle our difference with our revolvers," Talbot muttered, thoughtfully.

Then, as he spoke, a dark figure jumped out suddenly from behind a shanty, cried, "Defend yourself!" and, leveling a revolver full at Talbot's breast, pulled the trigger.

The stranger was quick, but the Indian quicker still, for, as the stranger pulled the trigger, the Indian's foot, with a vigorous kick, sent the revolver spinning twenty feet up in the air, and the bullet went harmlessly into empty space.

The next instant, Talbot, with his revolver cocked and leveled, held the assailant's life at his mercy. And just then the moon shone out, and, by its dim, uncertain light, Talbot recognized John Rimee! With a passionless face the young man looked upon his foe. Coolly he folded his arms and seemed to court the death which menaced him.

An exclamation of astonishment came from Talbot's lips, and with a hasty motion, as if angry with himself for having threatened the young man's life, he let down the hammer of the revolver and thrust the pistol back into its pouch.

John Rimee's face grew flaming red and then deathly pale, and a look of wild despair came into the great, black eyes.

"Oh, you coward!" he muttered, tremulously, and with intense passion.

Talbot simply looked at the young man coldly and quietly, but answered not.

"You coward!" repeated Rimee; "why don't you fire? I have attempted to murder you. My life is yours by right. Why don't you take it?"

"You think that I am a coward because I hesitate to take your life?" Talbot said, quietly.

"Yes," Rimee answered, hotly.

"Give me your hand and let me whisper in your ear the reason why I do not take the life you have forfeited." And as he spoke, Talbot advanced with outstretched palm.

Rimee retreated from him; with clenched hands he waved him back.

"No, no!" he cried, wildly; "do not come near me. I cannot bear to have you touch me!"

"Why do you hate me so bitterly?" Talbot asked, a sad smile upon his face.

"Because you are stronger than I am!" cried Rimee, passionately; "something saves you from me. I want to kill you, and you, coward that you are, will not kill me, and so end the strife, which is endless torture to me!"

"Why not go your way in the world, and leave me to go mine?" Talbot demanded.

"No, no, it cannot be!" Rimee cried, hurriedly; "one of us must die that the other may live!"

"I shall never take your life!" Talbot declared, firmly.

"Then I shall take yours!" Rimee replied, desperately.

"As you please in regard to that," Talbot said, quietly, and there was an expression of sadness upon his face. "But now I tell you that I will never raise my hand against you. If you still persist in your design upon me, you do so, knowing that to you I am an unarmed man, one who will not move a finger to save himself from your attack."

And then Talbot turned abruptly and retraced his steps to the Waterproof saloon. The Indian followed slowly, but the glance he gave at Rimee plainly showed that he was not troubled with any scruples, and would gladly have "wiped out" the dark-eyed stranger at a crack of Talbot's little finger.

Rimee gazed for a moment at the retreating figure of Talbot, fast disappearing in the gloom of the night, and then, pressing his hands upon his temples, he reeled against the side of the shanty, and, but for the support, would have fallen.

"Oh! heaven in mercy let me die and thus escape from this terrible agony!" he cried, in despair. Oh! I am burning up with passion! What have I ever done that I should suffer in this way? Oh, mother! mother! look down and help me!" And then Rimee sunk, almost fainting, to the ground, his heart a battlefield for conflicting passions.

Then up the street came a noisy crowd of miners. It was Turner and his party returning from their raid on Black Joe.

Rimee, with a powerful effort, recovered himself, and sprang to his feet, and, as the party came along, he joined in with them and proceeded to the Waterproof saloon.

Turner's expedition had been completely successful. Black Joe's fortification had surrendered at the first summons, and all that Joe stipulated for was ten hours or so to get ready, and promised that at early sunrise he and his folks would leave the Bar, never to return. To tell the truth, Turner was a little disappointed, a feeling which was generally shared by all the members of his squad. They had expected a fight; and, as for the spectators, who had journeyed with the expedition, they vented their disgust in very emphatic words, and voted Black Joe a "first-class fraud fur to be h'isted outen his shanty an' say nary word ag'in it!"

The return of the expedition collected all the loungers around the hotel, and while Turner was making his report, fortune—fickle goddess!—decreed that the road-agent leader, Jim York, alias Rocky Mountain Rob, should have a fresh deal.

As we have said, the five policemen of Judge Lynch had taken Kangaroo and York back to their former place of confinement, the little shed attached to the kitchen of the saloon. The cords had not been replaced upon their ankles, and the new jailers had never troubled themselves to examine the lashings upon their wrists, never thinking that, by constant working, the knots which held the cords might be loosened.

And, as the five men thought that the brief half-hour they had to guard the prisoners might be tiresome, a pack of cards were procured, and four of the five sat down on the floor of the shed and were soon deep in the mysteries of the game known as "high, low, jack." The fifth man busied himself about the prisoners for awhile; then he went to the door of the shed, which opened into the air, and looked out. And then he came back and leaned on the barrel, upon which the candles were placed which lighted up the shed.

Then a slight dispute arose among the players. The man leaning on the barrel got interested; he leaned over further; then, all of a sudden the barrel tumbled over, and out went the candles. All was confusion. The men sprung to their feet and groped about in the dark for the extinguished candles; but one, quicker of wit than the rest, opened the door of the kitchen, and a flood of light streamed in. Oh, horror! the prisoners were gone, and with them one of the five guards! There was a traitor in the camp! The secret agent of the outlaw had served him well!

To throw open the door of the shed and dash out into the air was but the work of a moment. The moon was struggling amid a mass of dark clouds, but, even by its uncertain light, they could distinguish three men running for dear life down the street.

With a yell and a halloo the guards gave chase, opening a brisk fire with their revolvers upon the fugitives as they ran. Five hundred paces down the street, behind a shanty, stood a man and four horses. To the horses ran the road-agents. They gained their side, vaulted into the saddles in hot haste, and urged the beasts on, before they had fairly backed them.

"Good-by, boys! sorry I can't stay to see that little hanging affair!" York yelled, as he stuck his heels into the horse's flanks and gave him his head.

"So-long, gents!" Kangaroo shouted, in derision.

But the fugitives were not yet safe, for the revolver-balls rattled around them, and one sent with a truer aim than its fellows, tore its way through a human's flesh. And as the road-agents galloped down the street, with them went a horse that lacked a rider.

CHAPTER XLII.

TALBOT'S MISSION.

THE sound of the shots startled even the crowd collected in Judge Lynch's court, and they poured into the street, anxious to learn what had caused the alarm.

The news soon came to the ears of the colonel that the two prisoners had escaped, assisted by one of the very guard who had been set to watch them, and that one of them had been brought down from his horse by a well-aimed pistol-shot. The Judge at once proceeded to the scene. The crowd around the dying man drew back and made room for the Judge to approach him. The man was Kangaroo. The long limbs now trembled in the agonies of death. Kangaroo looked up in the face of the Judge as he knelt down to examine his wound. With a feeble motion he waved him off.

"It's no use, Jedge," he muttered; "my checks air up and the game is called; rake 'em in every time."

"You may recover," the colonel said, proceeding to examine the wound with professional skill. He had not forgotten his early training on the Mexican battle-fields.

The ball had struck Kangaroo full in the breast, evidently received just as he had turned to deliver his parting defiance. The boast had cost him his life. The little livid mark on the dark, brawny breast plainly showed the entrance of the ball, but hardly a tinge of blood appeared. The colonel shook his head. Experience told him of internal bleeding and a fatal result.

"Recover? git over it? Bet yer five to one I don't, old man!" Kangaroo muttered, faintly. "I wonder if thar is eny sich thing as hell-fire? I'll know 'fore long, I reckon." And then, with a choke and a gasp, the soul of the outlaw fled to its long home.

Hardly had the outlaw's head sunk back, when Talbot and the Indian came up. They had been attracted by the noise. Talbot started in astonishment when he saw the lifeless form of the road-agent stretched upon the ground. He guessed at once that there had been an escape, and a bitter curse rose to his lips.

"Where's the other?" he cried.

"If you listen, I reckon you kin hear his hoss's hoofs a-gallopin' down the street!" one of the miners answered.

Upon the fall of Kangaroo the guards had given up the chase, as it was hopeless to think of overtaking the horsemen.

"I'll follow him though he has gone straight to the fires below!" Talbot cried.

"I reckon he'll fetch up thar sometime," one of the bystanders remarked.

"Whar 'll we git our hosses?" exclaimed Shook, who felt that some of the blame was attached to him for the escape.

"We don't need horses," Talbot answered. "Of what use are they in the mountain gulches? These fellows will dismount and take to their legs when they are fairly out of the valley. It will be an all-night chase and a chance for sharp fighting. Who volunteers to follow me?"

"I! I!" yelled a dozen voices in chorus.

"Colonel, I ask as a favor that you give me permission to run these fellows to earth!" Talbot cried.

"Go ahead!" the colonel replied, tersely.

"Now then, ten or fifteen men who know how to handle their weapons and are not afraid of Satan or all his imps!" Talbot exclaimed.

"Count me in fur one!" yelled Turner, excitedly. "Kurnel, I r'ally must volunteer fur this tea-party!" he said, in explanation. The colonel nodded.

The fifteen men were soon picked out. The only trouble was to select, for the miners volunteered to a man.

"Now, in ten minutes we start," Talbot cried. "Prepare your weapons and take plenty of ammunition, for this will be no child's play. And, colonel, send a mule with rations and an armed guard to-morrow morning to where the brook from the mountains comes into the Wisdom about five miles up the valley."

"Mabbe he'll git sich a start on us that we shan't

be able to trail him?" Johnny Bird suggested. He, together with Bob Shook, had volunteered for the expedition.

"The Indian here will track him though he had six hours' start instead of thirty minutes!" Talbot said.

"Mud Turtle find him if he go like bird in air," the chief grunted.

"In five minutes we start!"

Then Talbot dashed up to the hotel, ran up to his room, took a supply of cartridges for his revolvers, and snatched a Spencer rifle from the wall. This done he descended to the street.

As he emerged from the hotel, a dark figure came from some shadow and followed him. Talbot had the eyes of a cat. He wheeled around suddenly and confronted the dark figure. As he had expected, it was John Rimee.

"Well?" he asked, impatiently, and yet there was a touch of sadness in his tones.

"I am going with you," Rimee said.

And, as he spoke, Talbot saw that he carried a rifle in the hollow of his arm. He guessed that it was the same weapon which had proved so destructive to the road-agents in the mountain-pass.

"You know where I am going?" Talbot asked.

"Yes, and I am going with you," Rimee repeated.

"To shoot me down at some convenient moment from the rear?" Dick questioned, bitterly.

"Perhaps so," the young man answered, gloomily.

"Rimee, this man that I am about to hunt down to death, was instrumental in causing the death of my wife, Jinnie—a woman who loved me better than she did her own life. Now, I ask of you one favor; keep your vengeance until I settle with this man, then strike me if it pleases you so to do. Will you give me this promise?"

"And if I refuse?" Rimee queried.

"I'll have you arrested for threatening my life and kept in custody until I return," Talbot said, decidedly.

Rimee winced; his face showed marks of deep agitation.

"Why don't you have your quarrel out with me now?" the young man asked, gloomily.

"I have no quarrel with you," Talbot protested, impatiently.

"I've tried to kill you."

"And I forgive you for it," was Dick's answer.

"Why do you forgive me?" and Rimee clenched his hands together until the nails crimsoned the flesh with blood.

"You know the reason," Dick rejoined, meaningly.

"I do not!" cried Rimee.

"Do you really wish to die by my hand?"

"Yes."

"Wait until this affair is ended, that is all I ask," Talbot cried, chafing with impatience.

"Then you will kill me, for I deserve to die?" Rimee said, in deep despair.

"Yes, yes!" Talbot was becoming feverish at losing time. "You will forego your quarrel until I finish this work?"

"Yes; but I must go with you," Rimee exclaimed, in strange earnestness.

"No, no!" protested the man-hunter.

"I will go!" Rimee cried, hoarsely. "I cannot stay behind. I should die a thousand deaths!"

Talbot regarded the white face, full of anguish, for a moment, with a bitter smile.

"Come, then, since it must be so!" he said, as he hurried down the street, closely followed by Rimee, whose face was a strange mixture of red and white.

First, flushed with the hot blood, and then whitened by apprehensive fear. The daring heart that had so successfully given battle to the four road-agents, single-handed, was strangely torn now by the bare thought of the danger that was to be encountered.

"Forward!" cried Talbot, sharply, as he put himself at the head of the miners; and then, with rapid steps, the party followed on the trail of the road-agents.

The Indian, side by side with Talbot, directed the steps of the party. The chief had given his blanket into the hands of Shook for safe-keeping, and now, at the head of the war-party, attired only in his hunting-shirt and leggings, appeared like another man. The sleepy look, the shuffling gait, all were gone, and in their place the eyes of the lynx, the tread of the panther. On through the night—over rock and through thicket, until the stars grew pale and the cold, gray light of the coming morning flecked the eastern skies, the trailing-party went. It halted not, for to the eyes of the Indian, the trail of the fugitives was as plain as though blazed upon the trees and carved upon the rocks.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE FIGHT IN THE CANYON.

So eager had been the pursuit, and so much faster had the men proceeded over the rocky way than the horses ridden by the fugitives, that the road-agents had been compelled to dismount and take to their legs, and great was the yell that came from the throats of the miners as they came upon the deserted horses just as the daylight came full and strong. The morning was dark and cloudy. The wind tore through the tops of the pines in fitful gusts, and more than one of the miners, glancing upward, "reckoned" that "thar would be a hurricane 'fore long."

The fugitives had profited a little by leaving their horses, for now the trail was not so clear, and the pursuers were at times at fault, but the acute senses of the Indian were not easily baffled—let the road-agents turn and twist as they might.

York had not made direct for the outlaws' cave, as Talbot had anticipated he would do. It was evident York feared that he would be hemmed in there, as the secret of the mountain retreat was known to Dick; and so he had pushed boldly on for the headwaters of the Wisdom, trusting amid the almost trackless wilderness to baffle the avengers and throw them from his trail. He had not counted, though, upon the woodcraft of the Indian, who followed the trail almost as easily as though it was a beaten path.

The country grew wilder and wilder. They were penetrating to the very heart of the mountains.

At last the Indian came to a sudden stop. Despairing of baffling the terrible foe who hung so steadily upon their footsteps, the road-agents had separated and each one had taken a different way. After a careful examination, the Indian returned

to the party, who had gathered in a little open space amid the rocks, and informed Talbot that he had discovered the road taken by York.

The Indian's keen eyes had detected the small, narrow footprint of the outlaw chief, so different from the broad, massive mark left by the tread of the others.

So Talbot divided the party into three divisions. He and the Indian followed York, while Turner led a party to the west, and Bob Shook another to the east, in chase of the other two outlaws.

After they had parted from the miners, Talbot discovered that John Rimee had followed him. He said nothing, but pressed on, hot on the trail.

A short half hour, and York was brought to bay. A narrow, rocky ridge; beyond, a canyon cutting through the mountain's crest, and through the canyon leaped a mountain brook. The canyon had evidently been deepened and cut out by the spring freshets.

Into the gloom of this canyon York had plunged, and the pursuers had arrived at the edge of the opening just in time to see him disappear. A single glance the Indian gave around.

"Me know," he said; "Injun trail thar lead over hill; chief go over hill; ketch him maybe, he come out on odder side."

Talbot understood at once; so, after a few words, the Indian went off to the west, while Talbot and Rimee followed York into the canyon. And in the canyon, a mile or so from the mouth, they came upon York, intrenched behind a boulder, desperate and determined to sell his life as dearly as possible. The outlaw had procured a revolver and a bowie-knife from one of his companions during the flight, and so was well armed. York's person bore evident marks of his headlong flight. His face was pale and bleeding in a dozen different places, from the rude scratches of the forest briars.

"Do you surrender?" called out Talbot, ambushed behind a boulder, and taking deliberate aim at the outlaw with the Spencer rifle.

"Never, by heaven!" shouted York, hoarsely, his voice more like the growl of a wild beast than the tones of a human being.

"This seems like murder!" muttered Talbot to himself, as he again glanced through the sights of the rifle. Rimee was some dozen paces behind him, ambushed also behind a boulder. A moment Talbot covered the person of his foe with the rifle, then dashed it aside, drew a revolver from his belt and stepped out from behind the boulder. The clouds, which had been getting darker and darker overhead, now broke, and the pattering rain came down.

"Come out from your rock, and I'll give you a fair fight," Talbot said, advancing.

Hardly had he spoke when the white puff of smoke curling from the rock, and the sharp crack, told that York had fired. Talbot had believed that he was not within range, but the heavy revolver of the outlaw was a superior weapon, and a sudden, sharp sting in Dick's right leg, told him that he was wounded. The shot was aimed at his heart, but the distance was too great. Talbot felt his leg give way, and down he tumbled to the ground. With a yell of triumph, York arose from the shelter of the boulder. But that cry cost him dear, for in a second more the bullet from Rimee's rifle struck the outlaw square in the forehead and tumbled him over backward, stone dead. Rocky Mountain Rob had gone to his last account, dying with hardly a groan.

A second more and Rimee was raging like a crazy man over the prostrate Talbot. 'Twas but for a second, though, and then Dick opened his eyes and looked into the olive face bending over him.

"You have saved me again," he said. He had guessed what had taken place.

"Yes, he is dead," Rimee now responded, coldly, and he arose and stood with folded arms, looking down upon the face of the prostrate man. All his reserve had returned.

"And by your hand?"

"Yes."

And all this time the rain was increasing in strength, but neither of the two actors in this strange scene seemed to mind it in the least. What was the fury of the elements to the storm of passion raging in their hearts?

"The outlaw is dead now, and I am released from the promise I gave you last night," Rimee continued.

"Yes, you are at perfect liberty to kill me on the spot if you feel inclined to do so," Talbot returned, apparently not at all alarmed.

Rimee drew a little silver-mounted revolver from his breast, and fired four barrels, one after the other, in the air. Talbot watched him with astonishment.

"There are two charges left," Rimee then remarked.

"One will be quite sufficient to finish me," Talbot suggested.

"Yes; and what shall I do with the other?"

Talbot shook his head.

"That is for me!" Rimee added, in gloomy desperation.

"For you?"

"Yes."

Then Rimee knelt and leveled the revolver at Dick's head. Talbot never flinched, but looked Rimee straight in the eye. A look of anguish came over the olive face, and the revolver dropped from his nerveless hand.

"I cannot do it!" Rimee moaned; "and we must not leave this place alive. The agony I have suffered for the last few days, if not quenched, will drive me mad."

"You wish to die?" Talbot demanded, earnestly.

"Yes."

"And you wish me to die here with you?"

"Yes."

"Listen, then; there is no need that we should use a weapon to compass our destruction. We can die here together without moving hand or finger."

Rimee looked at him in amazement, and Talbot detected that there were tears in the large, dark eyes.

"The rain is falling fast; this canyon is but a passage for the waters of the 'divide.' Within a short half hour at most, yonder brook will be a raging torrent that neither man, horse, nor even wild beast can stem. All we have to do is to remain quiet here. In time the torrent will sweep us both to sure destruction."

"And do you wish to die?" Rimee asked, slowly.
 "Why not?" he said, and then he clasped one of Rimee's hands and held it within his own; "but you, save yourself; you are unhurt and can escape. Leave me here alone to die."

CHAPTER XLIV. THE SECRET.

FOR a moment Rimee looked into Talbot's face with a look of horror.

"What!" he cried, "you warn me of the coming danger, and bid me escape, and leave you here to meet it?"

"Yes."

"You forgive me all my mad attempts upon your life, and bid me save myself, when, simply by remaining silent, you could have destroyed me?"

"Yes."

"Never!" cried Rimee, with fierce and fiery energy, springing to his feet. "You shall not die! I will save you!"

And then, with a strength that few would have thought was latent in that slender frame, Rimee picked up the wounded man as though he had been but a great baby, and, staggering under the weight, came down the canyon.

Faster and faster the rain-drops fell; higher and higher rose the little stream, swelling and chafing within its narrow bounds.

With a strength born of desperation, Rimee toiled on with his heavy burden. A hundred yards further on, and the mouth of the canyon appeared; but then, behind the fugitives, came the gathering roar of the waters of the "divide" rushing down the mountain rift. The bank was gained just as the angry flood came rushing on, as if enraged at being cheated of its prey. And then, on the high ground beneath the pines, safe from the water's mighty flood, Rimee laid down his burden and fainted dead away on the brown carpet of pine burs.

When Rimee recovered, Talbot's strong arms encircled the slender form, and his warm, passionate kisses were calling the truant life back to the olive, waxen cheeks. Talbot held a woman within his arms! John Rimee and Colomba Merimee, the fortune-teller, were one! The girl blushed crimson as she looked up into Talbot's face.

"You have discovered me?" she murmured.

"Yes, I guessed your secret long ago, and learned to love you, although you said that you sought my life."

"I did so. Oh, I am so unwomanly!" and the girl covered her hot face with her hands, while the tears came slowly from the brilliant dark eyes.

"Tell me, why did you seek my life?"

"At Walla Walla, two years ago, my brother fell by your hand," she said, slowly.

"Gabriel Revere?" he asked.

"Yes."

"His blood is on my hands; I cannot deny it; but it was an accident," he said, earnestly. "I became involved in a quarrel; he came between as I fired upon my assailants, and fell; but, as I hope for mercy hereafter, my shot was not aimed at him."

Then over the face of the girl came a look of supreme joy.

"Oh, you have taken such a weight from my soul," she murmured. "I came to Walla Walla in search of him; they told me that he had been murdered by you. Brought up on the Texas frontier, more like a boy than a girl, and accustomed to accompany my brother in all his wild expeditions—to assume a disguise and follow on your footsteps seemed to me the simplest thing in the world. The unwomanly mask that nature has placed upon my lip made my disguise perfect; it seemed like the down of a boyish mustache. But, from the moment when I first saw your face at Barrel Camp, I loved you. I struggled against the passion, but it was stronger than I. At times I called up the memory of my murdered brother, and tried—nay, really thought that I hated you. But, the moment I came face to face with you, the hate vanished and love took its place."

"And will you take the life that you have saved?" Talbot asked, softly.

A long, loving look came into her eyes, and her lips gave him an answer, and yet spoke not a word.

The giant pines protected the lovers from the fury of the storm which raged and howled like a mighty demon through the mountain passes.

Upon examination, Talbot discovered that the ball from the outlaw's pistol had passed completely through the fleshy part of the calf of his leg, making a wound of but slight importance.

Two hours had passed away before the storm subsided in the least, and then the Indian came. The storm had overtaken him before he had reached the other side of the mountain, and, knowing the country, he foresaw that the mountain torrent would prevent the outlaw's escape from the upper end of the canyon. And while they had waited in the storm, Colomba Revere—her real name—had told Talbot her history. Great was his astonishment to learn that she was the daughter of the old soldier known to the inhabitants of the Bar as Colonel Jacks, but who on the frontier, twenty-five years before, was called Captain Jack Revere.

But, to Talbot's entreaties that she would permit him to reveal the truth to the colonel, she obstinately objected "No."

"It is the only favor I have to ask," she said; "let him think that I am dead."

"But, why are you so cruel to the man who is your only living parent?" he asked, in wonder.

"I can not forget the daily recital of my mother's wrongs," was her answer.

"But he, perhaps, can explain everything?"

"He has explained to me already, for he sought the advice of the fortune-teller, little thinking that it was his own child who called up the memories of the past. If I should believe my father's story, I should have to disbelieve my mother's, and to me she was always kind and good, whatever her acts may have been to others. I am dead to him; let me remain so."

Humbag Bar never saw the return of Dick Talbot, "John Rimee," or the Indian, Mad Turtle. The general impression was that they had perished in a desperate fight with Rocky Mountain Rob, for the body of the outlaw was borne by the mountain torrent from the ravine, where it had fallen down into the Wisdom river.

The miners plucked the mutilated remains of the outlaw—for the rocks and trees that barred the pas-

sage of the torrent had made sad work with the once handsome features of Jim York—from the water and gave it a decent burial. And over the grave of the outlaw some unknown hand had planted a wild white rose—strange emblem of purity to bloom above the grave of the road-agent. And the same unknown hand plucked away the weeds that strove to choke the growth of the flower. No man so bad in this world but that, when dead, some one is left behind who will cherish his memory; and pretty Bessie Shook never spoke of the terrible outlaw without a sigh coming from her lips. She never loved him, but if he had been an honest man—"it might have been."

The Vigilantes were a complete success, and almost without striking a blow; and then, as the colonel had been such a complete success as Judge Lynch, the citizens of the Bar concluded that they might as well have the colonel "run the machine" a little while longer, and as the Vigilance Committee was done for after the rogues had departed, the inhabitants got together and incorporated the city of Humbag, and took into the city limits Get-up Gulch and Poor-shoot city. Of this combined municipality Colonel Jacks was elected sole arbiter, Judge, and Mayor.

Bob Shook still rides the express, and the old man runs the Waterproof, and some public-spirited citizens have talked about getting a subscription to build a church for the old man to hold forth in on Sundays.

The fortune-teller disappeared as mysteriously as she had come.

The colonel, after thinking the matter over, came to the conclusion that in some way the woman had learned a little in regard to his early life, and invented the rest, but the wonderful resemblance of John Rimee to his dead wife was still a puzzle to him.

The road-agents disappeared after York's death. His firm hand alone kept up the band, and no more in the mountain passes the drivers of the coaches watch for the coming of the dreaded road-agent, Rocky Mountain Rob.

THE END.

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